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CONTENTS

Amalia CĂLINESCU (University of Bucharest, Romania)
An Artist of the Floating World: An Interdisciplinary Perspective……4

Sreya Mallika DATTA & Anil PRADHAN (University of Leeds, UK / Jadavpur University, India)
Women in Love: *Zami* and the Politics of the Black Lesbian Body in the Diaspora……18

Zoly RAKOTONIERA RAKOTONDRAVELO (University of Antananarivo, Madagascar)
"Our Women Keep Our Skies from Falling": Representation of Women's Challenges and Resilience in Three Contemporary African Novels……29

Cornelia VLAICU (Independent Researcher)
Re-Visioning Deer Woman……40

Mandana ARFA-KABOODVAND & Karen FERREIRA-MEYERS (University of Eswatini)
Critical Thinking, Reading Comprehension, and Social Justice: University Students' Knowledge of the Concept of Slavery……53

Niculae-Liviu GHERAN (Babeș-Bolyai University)
Subversive Hybridity and Mimicry in the Visual Representations and Philosophy of Vietnamese Cao Đàism……66

Jaime SEGURA SAN MIGUEL (Universidad Complutense de Madrid**)**
Book Review: *Y nació el asesino en serie. El origen cultural del monstruo en el cine de terror estadounidense*, by Erika Tiburcio Moreno……76

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An Artist of the Floating World: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

Abstract: Kazuo Ishiguro acknowledges the fallibility of the human condition, and herein lies the therapeutic core of his novels. The current study proposes a theoretical approach to Ishiguro's second novel (1989) from an interdisciplinary perspective on the main character's narrative. In the first part, Henry James' interpretation of literature applies to Masuji Ono's totalitarian views to link fiction to real life. The second part discusses the relativity of choices and decisions based on transgenerational ethics as presented in Strauss and Howe's Fourth Turning Theory. The third part focuses on Ono's narrative unreliability as a form of confabulation. Since Ono's recollections often clash with what his family can remember about certain events, the painter may be suffering from the false memory effect as a form of healing old trauma. The last subchapter explains the concept of 'mono no aware' from a scientific perspective. The Japanese understanding of the 'pathos of things' is reflected in the second law of thermodynamics, which stipulates that universal disorder will always increase. While young Ono refuses to accept the floating world, old Ono seeks to make peace with the transitory nature of existence, which is equivalent to accepting the entropy of the Universe.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, interdisciplinarity, psychotherapeutic Literature, house of fiction, generational cohorts, confabulation, entropy

Introduction: Three 'Houses of Fiction'

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels are best known for their psychotherapeutic nature despite their non-nail-biting plots. Ishigurian characters' imperfect perceptions, decisions, and recollections can help readers embrace the limitations of the human condition and thus find healthier ways of decoding their own inner and outer worlds (Beedham 25). The British writer of Japanese origins enjoys experimenting with the human condition and imbues his emotional storytelling with an irresistible love for human error, thus conflating Henry James and George Eliot's fiction creeds to produce high-quality psycho-literature: "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" (James, *The Art* 155); "the greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowmen beyond the bounds of our personal lot" (Eliot 270-271). Thus, Kazuo Ishiguro selects his characters from the most unlikely raw models for younger generations to write about realistic moralities and genuine human behavior. According to James, the more trivial or common the characters' lives, the less artificial the art of fiction.

On the other hand, according to the Anglo-Japanese writer, the darker and more confused the protagonist's mind, the more realistic the prose. Ishiguro's narrative intention is therefore oriented toward analyzing different hypostases of the self, arranged non-chronologically along the main characters' timelines. *Looking back, what do I see?*—this seems to be the recurrent question in the protagonists' subconscious minds: "[…] as I've got older, I think I've realized that while it is important to have principles, you have far less control of what happens. These principles and positions only get you so far because what actually happens is that you don't carefully chart your way through life" (Vorda 16).

Perhaps the most prominent representative of James' artistic views among Ishigurian characters is the

former nationalist painter Masuji Ono. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, hardly anything seems to happen, and yet there are numberless worlds of interpretation inside and outside the novel's boundaries. Masuji Ono is a retired artist who has lost his wife and son in the war and who tries to find some personal sense in the changes that Japan is still undergoing, three years after surrendering to the Allied Powers in the Second World War. The main focus is on Ono's past, specifically when he was a child and young adult, but there is also an apparently chronological plot advancement, with four distinct time frames: October 1948, April 1949, November 1949, and June 1950. The period between October 1948 and June 1950 depicts Ono's continued attempt to marry his younger daughter Noriko while he muses over his lost privileges as a nationalistic painter. Ono is far and away one of the most unreliable narrators in fiction, having himself doubts about the validity of his recollections. However, his account manages to intermingle existential themes like post-totalitarianism, conscience and consciousness, the transcendence of choices and decisions with moral relativity, and intergenerational conceptualization, using a simple, non-flowery prose style. Masuji Ono is both the creator and the critic of his own life, throughout which he has intersected with many other life creators and critics by the grace of human interconnection. This is the crux and crucible of human existence, both in real life and in fiction: "It is with the kinds of criticism exactly as it is with the kinds of art—the best kind, the only kind worth speaking of, is the kind that springs from the liveliest experience" (James, *The Art* 136). Mental projection can thus take diverse routes, depending on how often the main character and readers alternate between acting and analyzing.

On the surface, Ono's account seems to lack the gusto and freedom of a genuinely lived life. However, the fabric of his story can reconstruct itself with every reading and re-reading of the novel, in accordance with Henry James' "house of fiction," a citadel with numberless pairs of eyes viewing life through individual lenses so that everyone will always see something different:

> The house of fiction has […] not one window, but a million […] every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable […] by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. […] at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes […] He and his neighbors are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. (*The Portrait* ix)

There are three 'houses of fiction' within Ono's life story or "spreading field" (ix): (1) his life in unreliable, manifold retrospection; (2) his interaction with the other participants in his past and present life, and their ways of viewing his life; (3) Ishiguro's freedom to create Ono's story as an expression of his own mind and consciousness. Since Ishiguro allows Ono to recollect his story, the events in the novel could hardly be chronologically juxtaposed. Here are some of the many pairs of eyes that inhibit Ono's 'houses of fiction,' directly or indirectly: his daughters, Noriko and Setsuko; his elder daughter's husband and son, Suichi and Ichiro; Ono's art teacher, Mori-san; the bar owner, Mrs. Kawakami; Ono's old friend, Nakahara; his other artistic colleagues and his pupils; the nationalist Matsuda; his student and protégé, Kuroda, whom he later reports to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities. The many forms of Ono's recounting, or the "pierced aperture," thus lead to new versions of the same past, masterfully interpenetrated and gathered into a new, ever-changing worldview (ix).

Ishiguro formulates intriguing questions into his readers' minds, whose answers very much depend on the subconscious assimilation of James' "house of fiction": Should art serve political purposes? Is Ono's talent wasted just because he has chosen to use it for political messages, in direct contradiction to post-war beliefs and mentalities? How should one know what side to take in order to stand by the right set of values? Is there an immutable code of morality and ethics that not even extreme events like the war or the atomic bomb can distort? Is the core of patriotism dependent only on people's systems of beliefs, which can change according to each period's socio-economic and political specifics? Although Ono's art

will be dismissed and repudiated in the course of time, his artistic trajectory cannot be judged entirely from a historical point of view. The whole is rarely the sum of its parts: "In the case of all things which have several parts and in which the totality is not, as it were, a mere heap, but the whole is something besides the parts, there is a cause; for even in bodies contact is the cause of unity in some cases and in others viscosity or some other such quality" (Aristotle 569). Likewise, Ono's frivolous art, inspired by the floating world, as well as his propagandistic work can only be regarded as an artistic act of reconfiguration of the external world: "It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance […]" (James, *The Art* 267). In order to find a sensible way of measuring Ono's artistic genuineness, readers should decide for themselves whether Ono's paintings convey "some expression of a total view of the world [he has] been so actively observing" (James, *The Art* 309). Ono's artistic choices could thus help readers to acquire new life perspectives on the ever-changing nature of existential morality. No human being can ever be aware of all the ramifications of sub-realities based on their decisions alone. Counter-examples invariably serve as clearer lenses than one's own senses. One can learn to behave in certain ways through others' good or bad experiences.

Relativity of the Greater Good

Through continued introspection, Masuji Ono tries to reconcile himself not so much to his past as to his post-totalitarian present while he struggles to understand how the same people can hold diametrically opposed views based on new collective beliefs (Tellini 1-10). The first proof of Ono's unreliability as a narrator comes from explaining how he has purchased his grandiose house. Though riddled with many details, his story has a well-established purpose: to show readers that some time ago the protagonist was a highly respected artist whose prestige, character, and status enabled him to obtain such a valuable asset at a low price. The bargain proved further beneficial as it facilitated the marriage negotiations for Ono's older daughter Setsuko. Seemingly oblivious to the implications of the term, Ono refers to the post-totalitarianism of the present day while trying to draw readers' attention to the tragic fate of his wife Michiko and his son Kenji. Ono takes another stroll down memory lane and, as he recounts Setsuko's last visit, readers are offered glimpses of familial relationships, behavior, and introspection: Ono's younger daughter Noriko can be very playful with her father at times, to Setsuko's discomfort. Ono's grandson Ichiro is fascinated with a prehistoric monster he has seen on a film poster. Noriko is sure she will marry soon, although no precise arrangements are being made at the moment, while the last-year negotiations with the Miyakes ended up in shambles for no apparent reason. Ono is moved by the beauty of the adult Setsuko in contrast with the plainness of her child self. Setsuko's husband Suichi thinks that Noriko's prior marriage arrangements failed for a reason he was not told, as does Setsuko herself, although Ono assures them both that the only pertinent reason that he can think of is that the Miyakes were intimidated by his family's high status. Through an intricate cobweb of small details, readers are thus left to believe how influential a person Ono once was. To further prove his point in the same indirect manner, Ono introduces new characters into his narrative—Mrs. Kawakami, Shintaro, Yoshio, Kuroda, Murasaki, and Tanaka—along with the Migi-Hidari, the establishment where he used to spend his free time, drinking with his pupils. This mixture of nostalgia and melancholia is a reminder of the former teacher in *A Pale View of Hills*, although Ogata-San was not overtly involved in any type of nationalistic propaganda. In his interviews, Ishiguro admits that he has taken the subplot of Seiji Ogata from his first novel and turned it into the fully-fledged plot of *An Artist of the Floating World* (King). However, Ono's poetic monologue represents more than just a nostalgic reinvigoration of his golden days. Now that he has set the backdrop of his real narrative, Ono can safely speak about his past influence on his best pupils Kuroda, Murasaki, and Tanaka, and then about his ability to influence someone's career effortlessly in the mid-1930s, through a simple letter recommendation, as was the case with Shintaro's younger brother, Yoshio. At that time, Shintaro was not

among his favorite pupils but, given the present circumstances, Ono appreciates that his former pupil has not been damaged by the war, unlike the bar owner Mrs. Kawakami. On the same contrasting note, he regards his present self as helpless and uninfluential due to old age and retirement (Walkowitz 1052). The narrative is so cunningly built that readers cannot prove Ono's interference into his own account, and all they can do is pity the older man for having lost his ability to help other people only by making his presence felt in a workplace.

Back to the present, Ono interacts with his grandson Ichiro, who prefers cowboys like Lone Ranger to Japanese heroes like samurai or ninjas, to Ono's great dislike. By helping his grandson with his drawing technique, Ono has the occasion to show his mastery of painting. Although Ono states that retirement was his choice, readers can deduce that Japan's losing the war in the fall of 1945 had caused his fall from grace. Although quite unlikely that such memories were never before related to his daughters, Ono tells Setsuko about the early beginnings of his artistic career, when his father vehemently opposed his decision to become a painter, claiming that Ono would start following a path of perdition and debauchery, as was always the case with the artistic world. The whole memory is more of a cinematic than a literary technique of past regression, and Ishiguro often admits that movies have played a significant role in his novels (Richards). Through second-person narration, Ono does not necessarily address readers, but rather another character: "You may be new to this city, in which case the name of Akira Sugimura may not be familiar to you" (Ishiguro 5). In the beginning, through the smooth intermingling of the present and imperative, the imaginary interlocutor can get the feeling of traveling with the protagonist without having to piece any puzzle together. However, what promises to be a linear narrative becomes a frequent wandering back and forth, an arrhythmic pendulation between the past and present. From this moment on, readers can safely indulge pertinent suppositions about Ono's involvement in shaping the greater good during the war.

By rememorizing an episode from Noriko's former marriage arrangement with Jiro Miyake, Ono conveys the younger generation's position towards all those who acted immorally during the war. Setsuko's husband Suichi also shares this position due to his tremendous suffering in Manchuria. Both Suichi and Jiro thus blame Ono's generation for its propaganda and unethical conduct, which has led to misleading and hurting people for the greater good. Moreover, all younger people find it highly unjust that the older leaders who survived the war are now trying to fraternize with the Americans while a lot of young people were forced to fight in the war and lost their lives in the process. Ono, on the other hand, still sees the nobility of his generation in trying to create a better and purer society and therefore rejects Jiro's idea of suicide as a form of personal redemption and societal purification. Public interests seem to have completely changed after the war, hence the transitory nature of collective values. Ono softens the recollection by adding his doubts about the accuracy of the information rememorized; however, the protagonist's memory loss at strategic moments seems consciously induced to take the blame out of his shoulders and redeem himself after his past mistakes. It gradually becomes clear that Jiro's family backed out of the marriage negotiations not because of the differences between the two families' background and status but due to Ono's wartime misconduct. By presenting a recent incident at Mrs. Kawakami's, of a simple-minded man being punished for singing patriotic songs, Ono indirectly explains the radical change of people's mindset post-war: if they once loved nationalistic chants, they are now so offended by anyone singing them that they will beat up even an innocent singer (Ishiguro 61). What was once noble and fair is viewed as abominable and traitorous in post-war times. The dilemma is whether or not older generations, directly involved in the war affairs, should stick to their beliefs and remain proud of their past achievements despite being condemned by the post-war nation. By still getting in touch with influential people from the past, Ono sustains his once-appreciated position as a nationalistic painter as well as his loyalty toward the past idea of the greater good. Ono is undoubtedly a very talented painter who stood

by his artistic creeds when his father wanted to deter him from his path and who sacrificed a lot in order to study with Master Takeda. He was also a very respected teacher and his pupils looked up at him. However, post-war society can no longer recognize his artistic merits, so much so that he can no longer paint while most of his creations are hidden away.

Ono's relationship with his grandson becomes stronger as Ichiro advances in age. While in the beginning Ono finds repugnant the boy's attraction for the Lone Stranger and Popeye the Sailor Man, toward the end of the novel the artist revels in Ichiro's resemblance to other members of his family, especially to his late son Kenji. This comes in line with the theory of human development proposed by psychologist Erik Erikson (Orenstein and Lewis). Based on the mental responses to human interrelation, Eriksonian stages can explain and validate life lessons and challenges, depending on how reactive or proactive humans choose to be. By using the term epigenesis, Erikson is able to anchor in time and space each stage of human growth based on the power of experience over genetic baggage in shaping people's behavior as well as their psychological profile: "[...] epi can mean *above* in space as well as *before* in time, and in connection with genesis can well represent the space-time nature of all development" (23, emphasis original). From this evolutionary point of view, the relationship between Ono and his grandson seems much closer: "I confess that I take a strange comfort from observing children inherit these resemblances from other members of the family" (Ishiguro 136). Finally, entering his fifth stage, Ichiro develops a sense of identity, fidelity, and devotion towards his closest ones, while Ono starts taking the best of his eighth developmental stage as his integrity and wisdom finally start overriding his past ambitions.

Generational changes have been studied by anthropologists and scientists alike, so Ono's blame for believing in and applying the ideology of his generation may not be that big. At the same time, intergenerational conflicts can be regarded as natural occurrences in the course of history. According to research, population segmentations are usually based on life-cycle stages, also understood as generational cohorts. Segmenting humans into smaller groups, mainly based on age, may lead to the proper understanding of their needs, wants, choices, and decisions (Lancaster and Stillman). According to Mannheim, any generation can be regarded as a social location able to influence its members' attitudes, beliefs, and values, in conjunction with other independent variables such as education and history (276-322). Generation gaps are therefore absolutely normal since age cohorts can be easily differentiated based on value programming. However, not all studies agree on the sameness of preferences among the people of the same generation, nor is it unanimously agreed upon the beginning and ending of certain generations, hence the occurrence of some overlapping (Reeves and Oh). The most famous generational theory, proposed by Strauss and Howe, is also called the Fourth Turning Theory, since every eighty or ninety years, a new cycle of generations begins after a crucial crisis (125). The four turnings, with their corresponding generations, are typified as follows:

*The High and the Prophet (Idealist) generation
*The Awakening and the Nomad (Reactive) generation
*The Unravelling and the Hero (Civic) generation
*The Crisis and the Artist (Adaptive) generation

The period presented in the novel, through representatives such as Ono himself, his daughters, and his grandson, spans at least four generational cohorts, known as mentioned below (Pilcher 481-495):

Generation cohort	Period
Lost Generation	born 1883-1900

Interbellum Generation	born 1901-1913
Greatest Generation	born 1910-1924
Silent Generation	born 1925-1942 *or* born 1927-1945

Moreover, the generations of the readers, who have to decide for themselves whether Ono should be held responsible for his patriotic artistry, are entirely different, with only one common generation cohort, which may now be considered the oldest Ishiguro's readership alive (Karashchuk et al.):

Generation cohort	**Period**
Silent Generation	born 1925-1942 *or* born 1927-1945
Baby Boomers	born 1943-1960 *or* born 1946-1964
Generation X	born 1961-1981 *or* born 1965-1980
Generation Y Millennials	born 1982-2004 *or* born 1981-2000
Generation Z Homeland Generation Post-Millennials iGeneration	born 2001-present *or* born 2005-present

The three generations in the novel are thus collectively conditioned to profess their conflicting attitudes toward the other generations—the more significant the gap, the harsher the intergenerational clash.

Generation cohorts in *An Artist of the Floating World*	**Traits**
Ono's generation	• nationalistic and patriotic attitude and behavior • sustaining the war through artistic work • making people suffer for the greater good
Noriko and Setsuko's generation	• blaming the older for the war • wanting the older to be punished for their nationalistic deeds • rejecting and rebelling against the set of values they were taught as schoolchildren • turning their backs to traditions and traditional heroes such as the samurai
Ichiro's generation	• favoring the American way of life

- wanting to learn English
- admiring cowboy movies
- ignorant of traditional values and ideologies

Because of the generation gap, younger people have not directly experienced pre-war nationalism, so they cannot understand Ono's inability to fall for the values of a newly westernized country. Ono's generation has thus two major possibilities, either to commit suicide or to retire forcibly, accepting that the model of the Japanese citizen has changed. Although he cannot easily embrace the new world, Ono tries to hide his past reputation as a precautionary measure to preserve Noriko's chances of getting married. By Japanese standards, his younger daughter is rapidly approaching the status of a spinster. The traditional ritual of getting engaged, involving the role of a matchmaker and a detective to establish the cleanliness of the families' past and their compatibility, seems quite grotesque in a foreignized country that has lost its nationalistic nature. It is at the *miai* of his daughter that Ono says, "I freely admit I made many mistakes. […] I accept that much of what I did was ultimately harmful to our nation, that mine was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for our own people" (Ishiguro 123). However, his family neither understands nor appreciates his acknowledgment of his faulty past and considers it a loss of dignity.

Ono's reconciliation with his grandson Ichiro breaks the vicious circle of intergenerational strife in his own family. However, there will always be generational differences, regardless of the cohorts participating in both real-life and fictional scenarios: sons will invariably oppose fathers, overtly or otherwise; younger generations will always have something against the older ones while what is relatively correct most often differs from what is universally fair. That collective choices and decisions very much depend on individual beliefs and perceptions proves the transitory nature of the greater good, which seems to create more victims than extreme doctrines like pure nationalism do.

Shifty Memory

In order to find his peace at the end, Ono has to go through several stages of purification, gravitating around mutually exclusive questions: Should he feel sorry for his past choices and decisions, or should he still stand by them? Should he accept the intergenerational conflicts, or should he react to them? (Wong 144)

According to Halbwachs, the act of recollection is mainly based on human interconnection and emotional ties. In other words, humans mostly remember when they are asked to do it or when they are reminded of certain aspects by others: "The greatest number of memories come back to us when our parents, our friends, or other persons recall them to us. […] Most frequently, we appeal to our memory only in order to answer questions which others have asked us, or that we suppose they could have asked" (38). Individual and collective memories are invariably interconnected and interdependent, yet conflicts arise only when unified accounts contrast harshly with personal ones, forcing individuals to revisit their pasts and reconfigure their expectations. The degree of incongruence between reality and its account could be divided into two categories of three subdivisions each. The main division regards information transmitting as either completely wrong or incomplete. Narrators that report wrongly will either misreport, misread/misinterpret or misevaluate/misregard the events they convey. If the information they provide is insufficient, then they will either underreport, underread/underinterpret, or underregard/underevaluate the knowledge they have about certain facts (Phelan 45-50). The degree to which these types of unreliability interact with each other depends on the nature of the narrative assigned to the protagonist: "What kind of first person? How fully characterized? How much aware of himself as

narrator? […] How much confined to realistic inference; how far privileged to go beyond realism? At what points shall he speak truth and at what points utter no judgment or even utter falsehood" (Booth 165)?

Ono's recollections often clash with what his family can remember about the same events, so readers will sooner or later start wondering whose recalling is actually accurate. Ono feels publicly sorry for his past deeds at a strategic moment, Noriko's *miai*, which ensures his younger daughter's future as a respectable married woman. However, Ono's apologizing surprises everyone present, which may mean that Ono has been dishonest about Setsuko's demand of him to come clean about his past mistakes in order to preserve Noriko's marriage arrangements:

> I'm sorry, I'm not at all clear what Father is referring to... I don't recall offering any advice last year […] Noriko told me she was extremely puzzled by Father's behavior that night. It seems the Saitos were equally puzzled. No one was at all sure what Father meant by it all. Indeed, Suichi also expressed his bewilderment when I read him Noriko's letter. (Ishiguro 191)

At some point in the story, Ono tells Shintaro that he cannot remember the past situation his former pupil was referring to. The mental blankness he claims to suffer from comes as extra proof of his narrative unreliability. Sometimes avoiding and obscuring the real meaning, at other times using it as a linguistic weapon, Ono manages to create different facets of the past while talking about nationalistic warfare, loss, guilt, and embarrassment. Not until the end of the novel can readers decide how wrong or incomplete Ono's narration has been, yet by that time they will have established a close connection with the protagonist in order to forgive both his lacks and his mistakes in reporting, interpreting, and evaluating. In psychology, confabulation or false memory is interpreted as a result of several mental disorders, like memory conformity, suggestibility, source misattribution, the misinformation effect, or even physical damage of parts of the brain such as the frontal lobe and the corpus callosum (Bernecker). All memory gaps are conveniently filled with distorted accounts, so old Ono seems to be suffering from the false memory effect, which also affects his reasoning. In this case, he is not lying intentionally, given that confabulation may often be a symptom of old traumas. A recurrent hint about his memory impairment are the moments when the artist stares blankly at things, thinking of nothing whatsoever. Depending on the dimensions of the stories invented, there could be confabulations of embarrassment and fantastic types of confabulation (Bajo et al. 31-43). Ono seems to suffer from both. As a result of his proneness to confabulate, he is as guilty of past misconduct as he believes he is, while he becomes guilty because he believes he is so. This is due to the emotional upheaval brought by the radical changes in Ono's life, which reverse or mix up the labeling of good or bad for his past choices and decisions. Ono is riddled with many forms of guilt, given that almost all the witnesses to his timeline are either dead or highly traumatized. However, Ono struggles to understand how guilty he should actually feel, and if he cannot reckon the degree by himself, he desperately searches for answers in others' verbal or behavioral responses to his presence. He wants to be punished, yet not by taking his own life, like the disgraced Naguchi, who composed nationalist hymns used in the war. Given the chance, Ono wants to apologize truthfully for what he has done—and also to understand how many crimes he is stigmatized for. Ono may have been traumatized long before he chose the nationalistic path of art. In fact, it may be his childhood and young adulthood that led to his extreme artistic patriotism as a form of rebellion toward what he could not control in the periods of natural growth and development. This is a case of past-within-past trauma. His father vehemently opposed his artistic choice, while his teacher Moriyama wanted to convince him that the only painting worth creating is the one that portrayed the floating world of carnal beauty and pleasure, which Ono considered a waste of energy, time, and talent (Sarvan 98). When speaking about his teacher's argument for the true purpose of painting, Ono confesses that he might have mixed the artistic grandiosity of Moriyama's words with his own way of influencing his pupils, which might have been borrowed from

his teacher in the first place. This comes in line with what neurobiological researchers have to say about the different locations of trauma-based recollections, which leads to a reliving that is only secondarily linguistic and primarily non-verbal, focusing on feelings, sensations, and flashbacks (van der Kolk and Hart 425-454).

Ono will always respect art, regardless of the passage of time and alteration of national creeds. The flashback of Kuroda's arrest and imprisonment, along with the burning of his paintings, is all the more painful, especially since it is his teacher that has reported the young artist for anti-national conduct. This may be the worst mistake Ono has made in his propagandistic past, one that has turned him into a fanatic nationalist reporting on his former student and friend. In hindsight, Ono still professes his innocence underlying his patriotic yet Orwellian[1] deed: all he had actually wanted was for an authority to talk to Kuroda only to realize too late that nationalistic institutions cannot function as psychological correctors of misbehavior. When Ono approaches Kuroda's house because he felt a burning smell, a policeman informs him that Kuroda has been detained for interrogation. Kuroda's mother, devastated and crying heavily, is also being questioned inside the house, making Ono realize the extent of his damage as a staunch member of the Committee on Unpatriotic Activities. Seeing the bonfire stacked with works of art, Ono asks the police if they actually have authorization for the terrible things they are doing, but it is too late to handle a situation out of his control and jurisdiction. The regretful scene matches the book burning scene in *The Book Thief*[2] or the dystopian theme of *Fahrenheit 451*.[3] By revisiting that particular event more than once, Ono establishes its traumatic nature, which, accordingly, drives him to relive it until he reaches a sense of closure by being punished, forgiven, or self-forgiven (Shaffer 32). However, his present guilt cannot be processed satisfactorily as there is never a direct confrontation between the teacher and his former student, and readers do not have Kuroda's way of seeing Ono's betrayal either. If the protagonist was drunk on power when he did it, then he may feel responsible not so much for destroying Kuroda's life as for putting his militaristic zeal above his artistic creeds.

While all collective memory boils down to individual acts of recollection, social factors play a significant role in determining its content (Halbwachs 22). As such, the reconfiguration of the younger generations' beliefs and preferences stems from the conscious act of forgetting or ignoring past beliefs and preferences. For instance, although still attached to Ono's old house, after becoming a married woman, Noriko fully embraces the western style of her new flat, which she finds more practical, easier to clean, and better ventilated (Ishiguro 156). The same is the case with the younger men in Ono's family: his sons-in-law, Suichi and Taro, are old enough to have formed a mature opinion about the good and bad of the earlier period, yet they openly prefer all that the American freedom entails. This lack of selection extends to Ono's grandson, who prefers American heroes to traditional samurai and ninjas, being too young to filter out the information provided by his environment. Humans may also pretend to change out of fear, which can explain their sudden switch of preferences, following the collective trend. Thus, former pupils like Shintaro start disliking what they once admired as they proceed to cut their ties with their former role models (Shaffer 52).

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[1] The English novelist and democratic socialist George Orwell is mainly famous for his last novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), a dystopia about the ramifications of the totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, the Big-Brother type of spying and controlling the masses, and the political manipulation of the truth, hence the term *Orwellian*, denoting anything that opposes the personal and collective freedom of expression (Senn 149-161).

[2] *The Book Thief*, written by Australian Markus Zusak, is an emotional novel about individual and collective destinies during World War II. As a way of celebrating Hitler's birthday, the inhabitants of Molching have to burn all the books, newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, and posters by non-Aryan authors.

[3] The dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451*, written by American writer Ray Bradbury, presents a bleak, bookless American world in which firefighters have the controversial job of burning any book they can find.

Ono is not resistant to change, nor is he entirely disloyal for his old beliefs. Instead, he seems to have detached himself from all the attitudes that came together with the groups he belonged to. He simply does not know how to behave when he cannot opt for the variants chosen by his peers: committing apologetic suicide, changing his mindset, or hating the remainder of militarist values. Confabulation or not, in his earlier memories, Ono was an important cogwheel in the societal mechanisms by choosing to paint militarist messages instead of the floating world. However, during his more family-oriented present, the protagonist has to admit that he may have been nothing more than an ordinary man all this time. The artist no longer feels the need to prove himself in order to preserve what is left of his former glory and reputation. Instead, he starts painting again, this time natural beauty, which can withstand the passage of time.

Pathos and Entropy

The title of the novel has both a literal meaning, of the carnal pleasures offered at night-time by certain districts in the cities of Japan, and a doubly-connotative one; the latter refers to Ono's wavering between worlds with different value assessments and, more profoundly, to the pathos of things or *Mono no aware* (物の哀れ). By the end of the novel, Ono seems to have developed an accurate understanding of the ephemeral nature of everything, which helps him accept the fragile condition of the human being, in accordance with the pathos of the whole Universe: "Mono-no aware: the ephemeral nature of beauty—the quietly elated, bittersweet feeling of having been witness to the dazzling circus of life—knowing that none of it can last. It's basically about being both saddened by and appreciative of transience—and also about the relationship between life and death" (Macdonald n.p.).

Although the novel leaves room for debate regarding how art can be viewed and understood by different generations over time, according to Ono's old friend Matsuda, art cannot strongly impact the course of things. Matsuda's perspective represents an authorial hint about how much Ono has actually contributed "to the people of [the] nation" (Ishiguro 163). His nationalistic paintings, like "Complacency" and "Eyes to the Horizon," contained motivational messages in accordance with the spirit of those times: "No time for cowardly talking. Japan must move forward" (Ishiguro 123). However, taken out of their patriotic context, these powerful affirmations can only indicate Ono's worrying naivety about political issues beyond his sphere of comprehension. Given that any artistic endeavor is a mental product, the mind does harbor perceptions and beliefs that change the world for the better or worse.

When Ono tells his dying friend Matsuda that he has started painting flowers and plants in watercolor again, he finally acknowledges his artistic insignificance in the grand scheme of historical events, a cruel reality also confirmed by his elder daughter Setsuko. The latter opines that his works did not have so strong an impact on the nation as a whole, only in some circles that cared for his art. Both (former) nationalists now have to accept their ordinary pasts within extraordinary times because no one else blames them but themselves: "It's just that in the end we turned out to be ordinary men. Ordinary men with no special gifts or insights. It was simply our misfortune to have been ordinary men during such times" (Ishiguro 200). At this moment, readers can safely identify Ono's prior narrative as a survival device employed by the elderly to give new meaning to their pasts by rendering themselves more important than they actually were in others' lives.

The novel ends in the present, after Matsuda's death, with Ono crossing the Bridge of Hesitation toward the old pleasure district. The name of the bridge indicates that people must have dithered for a while, on the bridge, before tasting the carnal pleasures of the floating world, although it also reminds of the totalitarian world of Orwell's *1984*, namely of the Ministry of Truth and the Ministry of Love (Senn 152). In the place of the Migi-Hidari, there is now an office building while a bench has replaced Ono's old table in the yard of the new building. The final scenes in the novel contrast the deserted and lifeless version

of the floating world at the outset with the new office building in front of which three young men speak cheerfully. The co-workers seem to replace the three boys playing with their sticks in the Nishizuru district, whom Ono has immortalized in one of his famous militaristic paintings. By deciding to sit on the bench and look at the three co-workers as they chat away, Masuji Ono officially turns an important page in his life book. While the artist was once forced to agree with his family's belief that younger generations had good reasons to be optimistic about their future, now, for the first time, Ono also believes in Japan's brighter prospects. He truly wishes the three men all the best, thus making peace, once and for all, with the younger generations. Although he has lost his best friend, Ono chooses to look forward through the younger members of his own family.

Masuji Ono seems to have finally accepted the pathos of things—that death and loss are irrefutable parts of the life cycle. At a scientific level, this is equivalent to accepting the entropic nature of the Universe: disorder will always increase. Therefore, according to the second law of thermodynamics, it is in the nature of things to move toward disintegration and decay. Humanity has always had trouble accepting this universal truth. Since all systems in the Universe run on energy, entropy refers to the forward movement of disorder throughout the systems and the heat transfer effect. Thus, in the distant future, all the energy will be wholly spread out so that no engine will be able to run anymore, including human bodies; and, when that happens, absolutely everything will come to a universal end (Martell 166). Therefore, the passage of time is an entropic phenomenon since it is natural for any system to get old and come apart, then rejuvenate and come back together. In other words, disorder is more natural than order, while both acquiring and forgetting information are examples of entropy.

Conclusions

By embracing his artistic insignificance, Ono indirectly accepts one fundamental law that governs the whole Universe. When humans resist change, they unconsciously oppose the natural tendency of all systems toward expansion and, ultimately, decay. Even restoring order in certain systems, like nations' regaining peace and prosperity after turbulent periods, is transitory and, most importantly, illusory since such deeds are achieved at the entropic expense of other systems, namely the death and sacrifice of numerous innocent people. The only direction is forward, the only order is expanding disorder, and Ono's subconscious seems finally to accept this universal truth. Providing a bird's eye view of Ono's inner worlds, Ishiguro turns his readers into genuine self-psychoanalysts. Thus, while jumping from one recollection to another in an unreliable fashion, readers will eventually have to face their own weaknesses and traumas. Moreover, by developing an inner appreciation for the present moment, they will be able to reconcile themselves to their past mistakes and put unforced trust in their future—and herein lies the true strength of the human condition.

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Women in Love: *Zami* and the Politics of the Black Lesbian Body in the Diaspora

Abstract: This essay focuses on the politics of the Black lesbian body in the Diaspora. Audre Lorde's autobiographical/biomythographical novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), as a female künstlerromane, narrativizes her polyamorous relationships with several women and presents the body as a contact zone of conflicting forces from which negotiations of the Black lesbian body in the Diaspora emerge, discursively mapping out an emotional cartography of identity, home, and belonging. The palimpsestic female body in *Zami* resists monolithic interpretations—it is Black, physically challenged, it is queer. The intersectional nexus of race, class, gender, sexuality, and Diaspora informs notions of the queer body. Furthermore, by embodying otherness, the body works to negotiate alternative spaces. Lorde writes the body into *Zami* the text, and the act of writing becomes empowering, informing the concept of the queer diasporic body with an alternative agential potential, portraying the woman as a "house of difference." This essay interrogates this complex intersectional milieu of the diasporic, Black, lesbian, disabled body vis-à-vis the cumulative forces of racial, sexual, and socio-political repressions in mid-twentieth-century North American society as represented in/through *Zami*, specifically concerning refashioning constructs of queer intimacy, belonging, and home.

Keywords: biomythography, Black, body, diaspora, disability, lesbian, Zami

Introduction

The intersectional nexus of race, class, gender, sexuality, and Diaspora informs notions of the queer body that is often represented in queer literary narratives in ways that defy set, generic expectations and markers of fiction. The body in such texts is not an abstract concept but is grounded in the materiality of multiple interrelating vectors of identity formation that demarcate and regulate conceptions of the non-heteronormative female body. For example, in Audre Lorde's biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), the body becomes the free-flowing responsive medium through which the subject auto-choreographs herself. Ultimately, the body, moving back and forth and flowing in either or both directions, becomes the primary vector for an exposition of Lorde's political sentiment. This essay reads Audre Lorde's *Zami* as a palimpsest and a narrative of difference and, within this context, locates the politics of the Black lesbian body in the Diaspora with all its attendant markers of race, gender, and non-normative sexuality. The palimpsestic body in *Zami* resists monolithic interpretations—it is female, it is Black, it is physically challenged, it is queer; and by embodying otherness, the body works to negotiate an alternative space of resistance and belonging.

Audre Lorde, the narrator-protagonist of *Zami*, writes the body into the text, and the act of writing becomes empowering, investing the concept of the body with an agential potential in portraying the woman as a "house of difference." *Zami,* as a biomythography, narrativizes the story of Lorde's life, beginning from her childhood spent in Harlem and moving on to an account of her life as an adolescent

and young adult spent in various parts of the US as well as Mexico. *Zami* occupies multiple spaces and temporalities as a narrative of belonging, (un)belonging, loving, and un-loving. Lorde's journey in *Zami* becomes part myth, part fiction, part non-fiction—a porous sequentiality that queers notions of both home spaces and amorous and filial relationships. Following Lynda Hall, we can say that texts such as *Zami* "queer the 'master narratives' of 'normal' traditional white, heterosexual, male power and redefine the boundaries through taking the agency of writing their own and other's experiences into reality and visibility" (394-395). In addition, "zami"—a Carriacou word meaning women who work together as friends or lovers—as a conceptual tool, is utilized within/through a diasporic re-imagination of female communal bonding. Lorde's relationship with her (m)other links the female erotic with the liberating creative act of writing. As a queer *künstlerromane*, *Zami* depicts the heroine's polyamorous relationships with several women. It presents the body as a contact zone of several conflicting forces, from which negotiations of the Black lesbian body in the Diaspora emerge, discursively mapping out an emotional cartography of home, identity, and belonging. This essay seeks to interrogate and understand this complex intersectional milieu of the diasporic, Black, lesbian, disabled body vis-à-vis the cumulative forces of racial, sexual and socio-political repressions in the political climate of mid-twentieth-century American society, as represented in/through Lorde's *Zami*.

The Black Queer Body Politics of the Erotic in *Zami*'s House of Difference

In challenging the myth of the family romance, *Zami* develops Lorde's emotional development through her sheltered family life to her political-sexual awakening inaugurated by her membership in 'The Branded.' For instance, speaking of her parents' attitude to racism, Lorde says:

> American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country. They handled it as a private woe. My mother and father believed that they could best protect their children from the realities of race in America and the fact of American racism by never giving them names, much less discussing their nature. (69)

The personal woe of American racism gives way to a sense of the body as a political entity when Lorde and her family quickly encounter racism in the US. In New York City, her mother "couldn't stop white people from spitting on her children because they were Black" (*Zami* 18) and remained quiet when she complained about discriminatory treatment at school (*Zami* 60). In Washington D.C., on a visit to an ice cream parlor, her family was not allowed to dine in simply because of the color of their skin (*Zami* 70-71). This event leaves Lorde aghast at the way racism is accepted without a challenge, even by her own parents, leaving her more determined to write to the President of the USA about this event of discrimination (*Zami* 70-71). The fact of her blackness, in a sense, writes Lorde's body. Her very existence as a Black woman in America proves to be enough for discrimination; her body is brought forcibly into the political arena by the very act of its existence and therefore is scripted with/through racial markers of identity. This momentous incident sparks off Lorde's gradual disenchantment with the institution of the family which fails to transform the private woe into a political one. Soon afterward, she moves out of her home and befriends several other women like her, and her participation in and contribution to an alternative discourse informs her self-fashioning as a Black lesbian subject and launches her into a world of sexual and political awakening.

Lorde's sexual awakening, however, begins in her childhood, mainly defined through her relationship with her mother. The body or the bodily in *Zami* is a phenomenological experience, felt immediately and viscerally. In this context, Elizabeth Alexander comments that "Lorde keeps readers aware of what the body feels, piece by piece, throughout the narratives. We are always aware of what her body is doing and feeling, from abortion cramps to sweat running between her breasts at 3 a.m." (701). As such, for Lorde, the body is, at the same time, an ontological process of understanding and establishing the self; she constantly

ascertains the state of her being through both ascriptive as well as non-ascriptive categorizations. For instance, she works against societal ascriptions and labels and defines herself as separate from them. She does not subscribe to the restrictive notions of role-playing by queer women (*Zami* 221) and often risks being considered "dangerous" due to being a more non-conventional *queer* body in already queer spaces (*Zami* 224). Furthermore, the phenomenological insistence on charting and defining the body and on making the reader aware of every discomfort, every drop of perspiration, and every sexual encounter in graphic detail portrays the body of the Black lesbian in a Butlerian sense of performative politics.[4] On the other hand, Lorde also looks at herself objectively when she says that she is Black, legally blind, and ambidextrous. The experience of the self as the other runs parallel with a constant selfing process—a process of establishing and materially building the self. The 'I' of *Zami* becomes multiple and splits, flowing free of heteropatriarchal constructs.

Reading *Zami* in terms of the politics of the Black lesbian body in the Diaspora, we think of intersecting systems of oppression such as race, class, and dominant sexual mores that act upon the body, constituting and interpellating the subject within a particular hegemonic framework. The body becomes a site of intersecting oppressions—a contact zone for struggle—where "intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (Hill Collins 18). Lorde evocatively sums up her stand on the necessity of focusing on the intersectionality of various elements, such as race, gender, and class, in the construction and projection of identity. In an essay entitled "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," she states:

> As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. (120-121)

Furthermore, in her essay "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," Lorde comments that "the Black lesbian has come under increasing attack from both Black men and heterosexual Black women […] For so long, we have been encouraged to view each other with suspicion, as eternal competitors, or as the visible face of our own self-rejection" (49). In this context, Lorde provides an example in *Zami* where the author recalls: "Sometimes we'd pass Black women on Eighth Street—*the invisible but visible sisters*—[…] and our glances might cross, but we never looked into each other's eyes. We acknowledged our kinship by passing in silence, looking the other way" (180, italics in original). Her ideas in both texts show how Lorde complicates the term "Black lesbian" by commenting on the several strata of discrimination in twentieth-century American society. Her assumed identity as a Black lesbian feminist is not a comfortably acquired self-denomination but is uneasily situated within the multiple layers of identity formation.

However, the queer body in *Zami* is not passively constituted by intersecting discursive factors but is subjectively responsive. It actively interacts with the systems of its oppression and shapes the identity of

[4] The idea that the construct of gender is constructed through repetitive performances of gender is central to Butler's concept of gender performativity. According to Butler, "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts which are internally discontinuous […]" (*Gender Trouble* 179).

the narrating subject. Lorde's political vision entails politicizing the erotic, where the eroticization of the body and desire is an active and positive political force. For example, she writes in an essay entitled "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power": "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (55). What is especially interesting about Lorde's conception of the erotic in the essay is the reclamation of collective work. As we have said earlier, the very title of Lorde's biomythography, *Zami*, refers to "a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (255). It is not coincidental that Lorde uses the word "work" in more than one of her writings. The distinctive conjunction of work with sexuality provides fresh insight into Lorde's conception of the erotic. Moving away from a view of Black women as stoically accepting their fate in the daily toil of their lives, Lorde uses labor to highlight a potentially constructive energy of the Black lesbian body. Reworking the class-race binary, Lorde interjects to detail the actionality of work/labor as a possible creative force. Speaking about the white supremacist character of the feminist movement in America, bell hooks claims that "when feminists acknowledge in one breath that black women are victimized and in the same breath emphasize their strength, they imply that though black women are oppressed they manage to circumvent the damaging impact of oppression by being strong" (20).

Similarly, Lorde locates the Black woman's strength not in her capacity for withstanding oppression but in collaborating with other women creatively, often sexually. An example of this is her polyamorous relationship with Muriel and Lynn, which she views as "a beautiful vision but a difficult experiment" (*Zami* 213) that provided them with the opportunity to write a world of experiences as queer women of color in their own terms and "learn by living it out" (*Zami* 213). The erotic desire locates itself within the body, yet it goes beyond to form society's life force; as such, the queer body of color becomes intensely personal and subjective as well as societal and political. Lorde, therefore, achieves a brilliant confluence of not one but several bodies at work/bodies of labor.

The politics of the body in *Zami* extends Hélène Cixous's problematics of writing the body or writing through the body by representing how the act of writing itself is inflected by several different markers of race, class, and sexuality, which relentlessly act upon the body. *Zami*'s universe is an intensely personal and personalized narrative of Black working-class lesbian relationships in mid-twentieth-century North America. The epistemic implications of the material circumstances of *Zami*'s world direct us towards an understanding of the intersectionality that qualifies such a world. This is especially in relation to a queer camaraderie with other such intersectionally marginalized queer women like Lorde, with whom she tries to build a community of solidarity. Together, they "create that mutual support which twenty years later was being discussed in the women's movements as a brand-new concept" (*Zami* 179). Lorde, in *Zami*, deals at every stage with categories of discrimination that overlap and complement each other. For instance, an important aspect of several of the relationships that are depicted in the text is the fact that they exist between women of varied racial and class backgrounds who need to work in order to survive and who visit gay bars together in order not to be otherized for their unconventional queerness (224-225). Unlike Edna Pontellier, the privileged protagonist of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*—one of the most important and earliest texts heralding the feminist ethos—one of the crucial qualifiers of Black feminist identity in *Zami* is the survivalist instinct of its protagonist. Unlike Edna, who dies by suicide, *Zami*'s protagonist lives through a series of tragedies and mishaps, including the death of her first romantic interest, an abortion, and the short-lived span of most of her same-sex relationships. Despite all of these aspects, *Zami*'s spirit is essentially triumphalist.

Noticeably, Lorde does not speak of the female erotic in terms of the lesbian experience but as the life-force of women; the erotic therefore is not necessarily sexual. Lorde's relationship with Gennie in the first half of *Zami* elaborates the notion of the erotic-sans-sexual. Gennie becomes Lorde's first love, which

awakens in her a nascent desire for another woman, becoming the life force that sustains her future relationships. In situating herself as a Black lesbian feminist, Lorde writes from her avowed political position but worries about these terms as well. Judith Butler, in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," takes a cautionary stance against the indiscriminate celebratory use of the term 'lesbian,' warning us that a fixed politics of identity based upon an uncritical usage of the term is amenable to appropriation by the very regulatory mechanisms that it seeks to subvert. Such a totalizing impulse would create a closet out of the closet, as it were, and prove detrimental to the theoretical and political potential of queer politics. She wants the sign 'lesbian' to remain "permanently unclear" (Butler, "Imitation" 308) because "to claim that this is what I *am* is to suggest a provisional totalization of this 'I'" (309, italics in original). The 'I' in *Zami* flows freely, with the continual phenomenological experientiality of the body giving impetus to a lack of closure or totality. Lorde's *Zami* ultimately throws up more questions than it answers. Does Lorde posit lesbianism as a political choice? Does her narrator-protagonist make any such definitive choice? To what extent does she perform her lesbianism? Lorde uses the word 'lesbian' cautiously. When Ann, the nurse, enquires about her sexuality, she replies: "[But] my experience with people who tried to label me was that they usually did it to either dismiss me or to use me. I hadn't even acknowledged my own sexuality yet, much less made any choice about it" (*Zami* 108).

Similarly, after meeting and making love with Ginger, she comments: "Ginger was my friend, the only friend I had made in this strange town, and I loved her, but with caution. We had slept together. Did that mean we were lovers?" (*Zami* 140). So far, Lorde does not necessarily term same-sex experiences between women as acts of lesbianism. It is only much later in the novel, when Lorde enters into a relationship with Muriel, that she explicitly uses the term 'lesbian.' Even then, she does not use it uncritically. She writes:

> *Being women together was not enough. We were different.*
> *Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different.*
> *Being Black together was not enough. We were different.*
> *Being Black women together was not enough. We were different.*
> *Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different.* (*Zami* 226; italics in original)

These lines on 'being' the queer Black woman reveal how the subaltern, as it were, of *Zami*'s world, is itself not a unified category—it is continually deconstructed and challenged so that it becomes impossible to simply write through the body. Instead, the body becomes a signifier of dispersion, dissemination, and cumulative difference. The act of writing, then, for Lorde, becomes both a reconstructive and a deconstructive process—a process of ascertaining and dissolving the notion of an empowered, definitive identity.

Lorde, therefore, renders the sign 'lesbian' unstable, as one which is mired in a defamiliarizing difference. Performativity in *Zami* is not restricted to only signifying a theoretical impulse of dissolving fixed and normalized categories of gender and sexuality. As a 'biomythography,' the term itself performs a creative, performative praxis; as a confluence of biography, myth, and historiography, it becomes the space where the body can write itself in an active and positive sense. Instability does not lead to disenchantment and skepticism but to an energetic outflow of creative energy, which expresses itself as the auto-choreography of the writing subject. In this sense, the body in *Zami*, though scripted by an intersectional network of oppressions, writes its own story, in spite of and even *because* of such a network. Such creative self-fashioning would seem to follow the trend that Bonnie Zimmerman notes in organized lesbian movements in the late 1970s. The motto 'the personal is the political' indicates that "if lesbian feminism is to remain vigorous through the 1980s, it is essential that the observations and analyses derived from personal narratives of all persuasions as well as from activism be incorporated into a political theory and strategy that can transform both material and psychological structures" (Zimmerman 682). The agency of

locating the identity of the Black lesbian body is both a personal and a political move. The Black lesbian body speaks up and demands a location within discourses of body politics. The problem, however, that *Zami* appears to have with organized lesbian politics is that it works towards a politics of dissension rather than a consensus. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, articulates the notion of coalitional feminist politics, which entails "a set of dialogic encounters by which variously positioned women articulate separate identities within the framework of an emergent coalition" (20). In *Zami*, such a movement toward a deliberately (dis)organized feminism is apparent in Lorde's involvement in a loosely held group of high school rebels called 'The Branded' that she is a part of, along with Muriel. The sisterhood of 'The Branded,' in the course of the biomythography, gives way to something far less ideologically organized when Lorde describes her interaction with other lesbians later on in the novel: "Together, we formed a loosely knit, emotionally and socially interdependent set, sharing many different interests, some overlapping" (*Zami* 203). Furthermore, Lorde claims soon after: "It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference" (*Zami* 226). The apotheosis of a differential coalition that Lorde refers to as the "house of difference" is her affair with Kitty or Afrekete (who is also the last lover mentioned in the biomythography and whom we discuss in the next section).

In this section, the essay has dealt mainly with the problematics of locating the Black lesbian feminist in *Zami*'s world and has also tried to advance suggestions about the intersectional constructed-ness and the productive potential of the queer body, its erotic power, and agency of work/labor. We have tried to show that there is a commensurability between the materially constructed and the creatively constructed body—a dialectical exchange that fashions and is fashioned by the Black lesbian subject. We have attempted to identify Lorde's "house of difference" as a positive political force and locate these politics within broader feminist debates. In the next section, we deal with the diasporic reimagination of home, its linkages to the mother's legacy, and its corresponding relations to sexuality. Therefore, we attempt to chart out Lorde's spatial re-imagining of sexuality and advance a notion of home that, in the end, is again based on difference—a key thematic knot that Lorde explores in *Zami*.

Home, Mother, and Afrekete in *Zami*'s Re-articulation of the Queer Woman of Color

In *Zami*, home is constructed, desired, and realized in terms of the protagonist's interactions with various women-lovers in different spatial and temporal conditions. The journey toward claiming a new spelling for her name entails a search for belonging—to the Black woman's body and the white country's space. In the pre-prologue section, Lorde comments: "Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home" (*Zami* 3). It is these experiences and relationships with various women that define Lorde's existence as a Black lesbian, which again is inextricable from her Carriacou heritage, the link to her home—exemplified by her marketing under the bridge and the exotic smells of spices and eroticized depictions of tropical fruits. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez argues that for the postcolonial autobiographer, "home is a particularly charged autobiographeme, a contested site on which the cultural conflicts of the larger society are played out in microcosm" (21). As such, "autobiography is not just an exercise in recapturing the past, but a future oriented project that seeks to establish a secure home ground where the subject may reside without fear of displacement or humiliation" (de Hernandez 21).

Similarly, in *Zami*, the locational politics that inform the diasporic body find themselves inextricable from affirming a differential sexuality that retroactively imagines home as Carriacou—a community defined by sisterhood. While Lorde's world in *Zami* is populated by characters attempting to come to terms with the cultural conflicts of the larger society, *Zami*'s peculiar intensity lies in Lorde's relentless examination of (dis)placements; *Zami*, in other words, becomes a signifier of difference for which the signified is never

fully established. Carriacou becomes an interesting appropriation because it speaks of a definitive, female identity strengthened by the purposeful collaboration of women living in a society as well as deconstructs the idea of an uncomplicated collective, investing the latter with notions of alterity and difference. Carriacou, therefore, becomes that magical space where one can both belong and constantly challenge the boundaries of the construction of one's identity—a Foucauldian heterotopic space[5] that resists categorization.

In the first few chapters of *Zami*, Lorde details the racial discrimination that she and her family suffer due to their blackness, which eventually affects her perceptions about identity formations of the 'self' vis-à-vis the 'other' and vice versa. In addition, the feeling of nostalgia for a lost home runs parallel to the alienation experienced by Lorde. In this context, Maria Pilar Sanchez Calle comments that "this home ceases to be associated to a geographic location in order to become a metaphorical space or a utopian place where the limitations imposed by race and gender have been overcome" (162). Early on in *Zami*, Lorde comments: "*home* was still a sweet place somewhere else which they had not managed to capture yet on essay […] It was our own, my truly private paradise of blugoe and breadfruit hanging from the trees, of nutmeg and lime and spadilla, of tonka beans and red and yellow Paradise Plums" (14; italics in original). This aspirational idea of home, as desired by Lorde, is made possible by the erotic realizations through "the things from the bush," the "cocoyams," the "cassava," and the "ripe red finger bananas" bought by Afrekete from "under the bridge," who has a "spicy herb-like odor" (*Zami* 243) and whose hands are "coconut-spicy" (*Zami* 245) and who, also, as Lorde contends, "taught [her] roots, new definitions of [our] women's bodies—definitions for which I had only been in training to learn before" (*Zami* 249-250). Commenting on *Zami* as a 'biomythography,' Monica B. Pearl observes that "[i]f the 'bio' of 'biomythography' refers to Audre Lorde's life, the 'myth' refers to the stories of community, to connection" (316). She further notes that it is "a narrative that is meant to cohere her identities. To merge self and community, to find a place for self in community, to find home" (Pearl 316). Concerning the 'graph' of biomythography, Pearl comments that it "is the writing, the text. The home she finds is in language" (316). Lorde's self-identification as a journeywoman is therefore apt in this context. The diasporic identity is derived from her being a second-generation Black migrant in America and from a non-belonging other regarding class and gender, ability, sexuality, and race. It is this state of diasporic uncertainty which leads her to devise ways of finding a new spelling for her name. Her intersecting, plural identities construct her 'self,' which, in turn, becomes multiple, mimetic of the multiple physical and emotional journeys in *Zami*.

Paradoxically, Lorde discovers home through dissemination rather than convergence, i.e., through her relationships with multiple women, creating for herself a sense of belonging through queer intimacies with women. The marginalities incumbent upon Lorde due to her Black, lesbian identity(ies) do not discourage her from seeking recognition from, and the camaraderie of, the women she gets into sexual or emotional relationships with—often Black lesbians like herself. Drawing from these relationships, in varying degrees, with women such as Gennie, Ginger, Bea, Eudora, Felicia, Muriel, and Afrekete, Lorde reaches a state where her life stands written by the different loves she has had and lost. She comments: "Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me—so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her" (*Zami* 255). Lorde further contends that these relationships have taught her how to construct her 'self' and give voice to the silence of the Black lesbian in twentieth-century North American society. She writes: "I love each of them as a piece of me, and

[5] Michel Foucault defines the heterotopic space as 'counter-sites' in which "the real sites, and all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted," making them the kind of places that "are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (24).

I choose these words with the same grave concern with which I choose to push speech into poetry, the mattering core, the forward visions of all our lives" (*Zami* 256).

Consequently, the notion of belonging to each one of these women-lovers colors Lorde's perceptions of finding and being at home; she realizes that, "Once *home* was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother's mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home" (*Zami* 256; italics in original). Owing to limited community support, the lesbian sisters form "a loosely knit, emotionally and socially interdependent set," accepting that "as lesbians, [they] were all outsiders and all equal in [their] sisterhood" (*Zami* 203). She even experiments with a triad relationship with Muriel and Lynn, which eventually fails, but such sexual innovations were not shared in the lesbian community of the time. Nevertheless, Lorde rejoices in the fact of their novelty: "We were certainly the first to have tried to work out this unique way of living for women, communal sex without rancor […] we knew there was a world of our experience as gay-girls that they left out, but that meant we had to write it ourselves, learn by living it out" (*Zami* 213). As such, in *Zami*, Lorde re-imagines "family as non-biological sisterhood that emerges from the kinships of the family home and is tested in various home-making experiences with lovers and friends" (Bryant 264). She re-fashions home-space as both subversive of heteronormative and patriarchal notions of the domestic and that which is alive to queer ways of constructing the private. The "house of difference" is transformed into the 'home of *zami*' through the queerness of women's bodies that themselves come to signify queer home and homeliness.

The narrative of finding the empowered space of the home, as *zami*, in the Black woman's body runs a full circle and approaches its eventual source in another woman figure, i.e., the mother. Lorde's ultimate realization and understanding of the construct of the home lies in this bold and controversial finality: "There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood" (*Zami* 256). Lorde travels in a diasporic framework as a racial, sexual, and disabled subject, seeking shelter and re-location in diverse spatial possibilities of nations, relationships, and identities, until eventually, she manages to re-discover and recognize her 'self' in being 'Zami.' This is undoubtedly influenced by the language of her mother—the matrilineal, the mythical, and the communal. Interestingly, Lorde substitutes the patriarchal heteronormative source of existence and meaning with the matriarchal interactions among women-desiring-women. Evoking the Carriacouan tradition of close bonding between women in the absence of their husbands, Lorde replaces "the age-old triangle of mother-father-and child" with the "elegantly strong triad of grandmother-mother-daughter" (*Zami* 7). In this context, Barbara DiBernard notes that "Lorde's continuity with her mother includes a deep understanding of the connection between poetry and the erotic, of the erotic connection among women, and of the connection between poetry and survival, as well as of the ways in which as a Black woman her voice as an artist continues her mother's" (204). In fact, in the section entitled "How I Became a Poet," Lorde writes: "*When the strongest words for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words I remember from my mother's mouth, then I either have to reassess the meaning of everything I have to say now, or re-examine the worth of her old words*" (*Zami* 31; italics in original). However, the "special and secret relationship with words" (*Zami* 31) that her mother had both opens up as well as restricts Lorde's world: she has to reassess the meaning of the words and extract them from her vocabulary, even when they have formed her developing consciousness. The mother's language discursively shapes the subject, where Lorde displays a double impulse—she both seeks to move away from and return to the mother; as such, her journey in the novel becomes symbolic because it charts such a contradictory impulse. The mother is the sexual for Lorde, and the sexual opens out her multiple relationships with other women. The eroticized description of a particular incident further complicates this concept of the woman-woman relationship drawing from the mother-daughter interactions depicted in this manner:

> Sitting between my mother's spread legs, […] my head in her lap, while she brushed and combed and oiled and braided. […] I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace. […] Feeling the smooth deep firmness of her breasts against my shoulders, my pajama'd back, sometimes, more daringly, against my ears and the sides of my cheeks. (*Zami* 32-33)

The frankness with which Lorde describes her erotic experience with her mother, in a way, contrasts with the euphemisms that her mother uses for the female body. The linguistic and erotic dependence upon the mother informs Lorde's sexual development and becomes the basis upon which she writes the story of her life. The troubled relationship Lorde shares with her mother leads her to leave her home and become a member of a different kind of community—one of the young lesbians like herself. Starting with her romantic relationship with Gennie and then diverging into her sexual relationships with numerous women such as Ginger, Eudora, and Muriel, Lorde rounds off her narrative with a description of her affair with Kitty/Afrekete. Lorde's emotional landscape, beginning with an intense attachment to Gennie, which lasts throughout her youth, culminates in the following statement at the end of the novel:

> When two women construct a relationship they enter together, the anticipated satisfactions are mutual if not similar. Sometimes that relationship becomes unsatisfactory, or ceases to fulfill those separate needs. When that happens, unless there is a mutual agreement to simultaneously dissolve the relationship, there must always be one person who decides to make the first move. The woman who moves first is not necessarily the most injured nor the most at fault. (*Zami* 238)

At the end of the novel, Lorde concludes that there are no guarantees of permanence and that the worth of a relationship lies in its fleeting contingency; in a sense, Afrekete becomes the symbol of this mature vision. Therefore, it is not surprising that Afrekete also becomes a figure of *synthesis*: she is both the mother and the lover, both the home and the world, and both the mythical and the real. In being this figure, Afrekete also becomes the textual representation of an infinite difference; she becomes the paradigmatic culmination of Lorde's political vision, which views the erotic as an explosive creative force—a force that need not be permanent in order to succeed. Therefore, Lorde's conception of Afrekete deserves special mention because she simultaneously inhabits the space of synthesis and difference. As a Black lesbian, Lorde derives "Afrekete" from the classical African pantheon rather than the typical Greek or Roman. She comments that she "grew Black as Seboulisa" (*Zami* 58) and had to survive in New York alone "like our sister Amazons" and "the riders on the loneliest outposts of the kingdom of Dahomey" (*Zami* 176). Even the name "Afrekete" is derived from the original "old thunder god religion," which preceded Yoruba mythology where she was portrayed as a woman, and from "the later Yoruba/Macumba religion, where she has been transformed into the male trickster god Eshu/Elegba" (Keating 26). In *Zami*, Afrekete becomes the trickster figure of female sexuality.

The unabashed sexuality of *Zami*'s world, performed both literally by the characters in the text and by Lorde through her act of writing, is embodied in Afrekete. In a sense, Afrekete becomes the empowering figure of female sexuality; in another sense, she becomes someone other than Woman, a doubling influence with fluid gender identity. Interestingly, Lorde appears to draw a connection between her mother and Afrekete. She says, "My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time when that word-combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost unexpressible [...] Therefore when I was growing up, powerful woman equalled something else quite different from ordinary woman, from simply 'woman'" (*Zami* 15; italics in original). Later, she adds, "Since my parents shared all making of policy and decision, in my child's eye, my mother must have been *other* than woman. Again, she was certainly not man" (*Zami* 16). Such ambivalence is translated in the figure of Afrekete, who is neither man nor woman and who tricks

and plays with unequivocal categories of definition. As Lorde says, "*Afrekete… the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved,* [is] *whom we must all become*" (Zami 255, italics in original). In this regard, Lorde's sense of belonging and becoming is developed through the prismatic figure of the lover-trickster, the prestidigitator who shifts form constantly. Therefore, Lorde highlights, through Afrekete, the survivalist power of non-heteronormative and anti-hegemonic sexualities. Because Afrekete plays with gender categories and norms, she also destabilizes those languages of categorization and naming that uphold hegemonic structures of power by fixing identities into essentialized containers. Ultimately, the figure of Afrekete becomes the culminating force that does not end Lorde's story but terminates it only to continually regenerate its creative impulse.

Conclusions

In her biomythography, Audre Lorde narrates the difference while retaining her belief in a definitive political vision. Difference then becomes her sustaining vision and instills her belief in a non-uniform, non-monolithic, feminist politics. This essay has explicated the intersectional auto-choreographing of the diasporic Black lesbian body in *Zami* and its experiences of labor and same-sex associations among women—a body that writes itself and is written in turn by the very experiences that provide the occasion for its linguistic expression. *Zami* is, then, an exposition of the dialectical materiality of the body represented linguistically through Lorde's biomythography. This essay has also analyzed the points of interaction and tension between the linguistic and material representations of the female body, opening the text to a study of the performative cultures of/through the queer diasporic body of color. In articulating the politics of the Black lesbian disabled body in the diaspora, Zami becomes Lorde's unique conception of an alternative history-mythography, which develops her radically transformative notions of the body and of sexuality—notions that derive their force from the powerful force of the erotic.

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"Our Women Keep Our Skies from Falling": Representation of Women's Challenges and Resilience in Three Contemporary African Novels

Abstract: One of the major changes occurring on the African continent during the last 40 years is the feminist redefinition of gender roles. Yet, in a fast-changing context and despite all the critical advances in terms of women's conditions, a lot still needs to be achieved. A deeper exploration of how African women are represented in an era of globalization marked by State failure, migration crises, and extreme poverty is essential. This paper aims at analyzing the way women are represented in contemporary African literature. A feminist comparative analysis of three international prize-winning novels, namely *Americanah* (2013) by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Need New Names* (2013) by Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo, and *Juillet au Pays: Chroniques d'un retour à Madagascar* (2007) (*July in the Country: Narratives of a Return to Madagascar*)[6] by Malagasy writer Michèle Rakotoson enables us to shed light on hitherto unexplored images of African women. According to these writers, African women are victims of several forms of violence and injustice; however, they are resilient and are able to achieve agency thanks to national and transnational feminist solidarity. Such solidarity offers them freedom and the power to cause changes to their country. The novels also highlight the symbolic importance of storytelling for women.

Keywords: African women, representation, victimhood, resilience, transnational solidarity, storytelling

Introduction

In his poem "Our Women Keep Our Skies from falling" (1980), American writer Kalamuya Salaam[7] forcefully captures contemporary African women's conditions as he depicts the difficulties they face in modern society and how they overcome these problems. Salaam's line has been borrowed for the title of this paper because it also deals with the portrayal of the African female figure, the loads she has to carry, and the way she copes with challenges in contemporary African literature. The current debates around African women's conditions focus on the challenges and opportunities in realizing their rights, from basic ones such as health and education to those related to identity and cultural issues. This paper aims at intervening in those debates through a literary lens. In a fast-changing context, and despite all the critical advances in African women's conditions, a lot still needs to be achieved. A deeper exploration of how they are represented in an era of globalization marked by State failure, migration crises, and extreme poverty is thus primordial. Contemporary African literature has been chosen as the field of this study because the images of women which testify to their significant contributions in society, as projected by the media, the film industry, and literature, have considerably influenced the mainstream perception of African women. This comes down to emphasizing the fact that representation is essential in the definition of women: it reflects and at the same time influences their roles, rights, and status in society.

[6] Our translation

[7] Kalamuya Salaam (born March 24, 1947) is an American poet, author, filmmaker, and teacher. His poem "Our Women Keep Our Skies from Falling" was published in 1980.

Through a feminist analysis of the representation of women in three African prize-winning novels,[8] namely, *We Need New Names* (2013) by Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo, *Juillet au pays, chroniques d'un retour à Madagascar* (2007) by Malagasy writer Michèle Rakotoson, and *Americanah* (2013) by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, this paper sheds light on the challenges women face and their ways of surviving. First, in order to come to grips with the representation of the struggles African women have to go through in order to achieve agency, an overview of their status in reality and in theory will be presented. Then the paper will focus on the beginning of their journeys in the three novels, namely their statuses as victims of State failure. According to these writers, African women have to cope with several forms of violence and injustice. However, they are resilient and struggle to end their victimhood through national and transnational feminist solidarity. Such solidarity, which is the second point of the paper, characterizes the second stage of the women's journeys; it offers them freedom and the power to cause changes in their country. Finally, the discussion closes with the form of agency that the female characters achieve—the endpoint of the novels—the capacity to tell their own stories.

Overview of Contemporary African Women's Conditions

The current status of African women[9] has many commonalities with that of women from other parts of the global South. On the one hand, significant steps have been made towards their empowerment, but on the other hand, a lot still needs to be achieved. Due to lack of space, one aspect of such advances will be singled out here. Among the most remarkable progress which has had positive impacts on African women's conditions is their increasing labor-force participation. Africa has made notable achievements in getting more women into executive committees and board positions in the formal economy. The continent now has "the highest female representation at the board level of any region at 25 percent against a global average of 17 percent and marginally higher than average representation on executive committees at 22 percent" (Moodley et al.).

Despite all the advances being made in promoting women's conditions, gender equality for African women and girls is not yet satisfactory. According to the latest United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, African women's everyday lives are still marked by challenges, as reflected by "the ongoing efforts of African countries to accelerate the pace of assuring women's empowerment through all spheres of society—in the home and community, in health and education, in the workplace, and in political participation and leadership" (Africa Human Development Report 84). Among the primary women's not respected rights is access to health and reproduction care. Many women face severe deprivations in terms of health as a result of early age marriage, sexual and physical violence. The types of violence African women are victims of include "domestic violence, intimate partner violence, rape, genital mutilation and intimidation" (Africa Human Development Report 43).

Representation of Women's Status in African Literary Tradition

Many male and female writers have dealt with the representation of African women's conditions in and outside the continent, particularly since the twentieth century. The majority of them focus on the

[8] *Americanah* won the American Library Association, the US National Book Critic Circle Award, and was selected as one of the 10 Best Books of 2013. *We Need New Names* won the 2011 Caine Prize. Michèle Rakotoson was awarded the Grand Prize of the French-speaking world.

[9] Africa is a very diverse continent at all levels: religion, language, culture, and climate, to name only a few. As Ouzgane and Morrell say, the "discussion of Africa will not assume homogeneity or uniformity, but it will work from the basic assumption that what unites much of Africa are particular experiences of colonialism and development that have had a profound effect on the wealth of the continent's people" (4). The term "African women" refers to women on the continent in general, but there are obvious exceptions.

different facets of African women's statuses which mainly turn around "issues in feminism—voice, victimhood, agency, sisterhood, motherhood, subjectivity, speech, silence, power, gaze, knowledge and nation" (Naemeka 1). Such issues can be divided into two main categories: women as victims and, on the other hand, their struggle for power. Kolawole, in her seminal text *Womanism and the African Consciousness*, asserts that, "Much of the emphasis has been to underscore the liminal voiceless African woman with the result that she is still predominantly portrayed as a victim in various ways" (3). In African novels, instances of female victimization, which are the results of culture, abound. Okpala and Utoh-Ezeajugh provide a deeper insight into the social system through which female victimization occurs: "patriarchy, as generally accepted, is not the sole source of female oppression because women seem to suffer oppression in the hands of fellow women, especially in the African cultural milieu" (1). The most widely represented aspects of women's oppression are "childlessness, marriage related issues, and female circumcision" (Okpala and Utoh-Ezeajugh 3).

As introduced earlier, literature by and about African women is also essentially feminist. It does not deal only with women's victimhood:

> much of African women's literature has been concerned with change, overtly and covertly. Indeed, the very process of literary creativity as an aspect of African women's cultural production is about change. Many writers have confessed that they are motivated to write by the impulse to change the status quo and interrogate patriarchy, imperialism, and western feminism. (Kolawole 153)

Women's needs voiced in those feminist texts are multiple. As Kolawole says, "empowerment is multi-faceted, but it generally implies self-respect, dignity, self-assertion, and new moral values in a new quest for redefinition and self-esteem" (160). The strategies used by women for survival and empowerment have also peopled countless pages. They vary according to contexts, but most writers put much emphasis on the importance of solidarity between women as well as between both genders: "True self-realization by the woman can only come when there is a concerted effort and not through individual struggle," Kolawole asserts (156).

The three texts chosen for this paper simultaneously continue and disrupt the tradition briefly delineated above. Their concerns for women's difficult conditions place those novels within African women's literary tradition. However, a closer analysis of the different tropes and motifs deployed by the three writers enables us to distinguish several shifts in the tradition. This paper aims to shed light on those new representations of the female figure. To better understand the central motifs and techniques used in the novel, it might be helpful to overview their plots.

All three deal with the representation of Sub-Saharan African women who try to have better lives by fighting for their rights to education, freedom, and self-fulfillment despite violence and injustice. *Juillet au Pays* portrays the journey of Michèle, who leaves Madagascar in the 1980s because of the problematic socio-political context. Decades later, she returns to the country to re-discover its reality and "do something for its people" (15).[10] Similarly, *We Need New Names* traces the journey of Darling from teenage to adulthood as she grows up in the shanty town of Harare, Zimbabwe, and later moves to the United States of America. Written in the first-person point of view, that of Darling, the story begins with an overview of the harsh living conditions of the protagonists. Darling and her friends have stopped going to school and are almost literally starving. The first part of the novel recounts the daily lives of those characters and the strategies they use to survive. The second part portrays Darling living in America and relates her coming-of-age as an immigrant and her relationship with her country of origin. *Americanah* likewise traces the journey of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who immigrates to the USA. Narrated in

[10] All translations into English are mine

medias res, the novel is about the love story between the heroine and her university boyfriend. However, serving as a backdrop to this romance is the harsh living condition in Nigeria. Ifemelu's life trajectory is shaped by the general context: her father's unemployment and the shutting down of her university. She thus moves to the USA and, like the other heroines, comes to grips with the experience of immigration and becomes a writer. In the end, she comes back and settles in Nigeria.

Women's Challenges in the Three Novels: State Failure and Its Impact

All three writers portray the socio-political and economic contexts as the first force oppressing women. Thanks to meticulously-chosen short, vivid, and poignant scenes, the reader witnesses the deprivations experienced by the female characters in the three novels. In *We Need New Names*, three generations of women are painfully hit by the socio-economic agony of Zimbabwe. High unemployment rates, poverty, hyperinflation, and hunger are the dominant facts affecting their lives. Without a job, Darling's father has left his family for South Africa but never sends money home. His wife is thus devastated by intense feelings of emotional and material isolation. In order to make ends meet, Darling's mother has to do several odd jobs. As a result, she has almost no time to take care of her daughter or herself, and it is her mother, Darling's grandmother, who has to look after the girl.

All those efforts, however, prove to be not enough as Darling's everyday life in Zimbabwe is determined by unfulfilled basic needs. The very first pages of the novel open with a scene rendering this sad reality: the heroine, who has dropped out of school, spends her days with her friends stealing guava in the neighborhood because she has nothing else to eat. Such physical deprivation also affects the characters' morality. The symbolic episode in which Darling's group of friends discovers the dead body of a woman and steals her shoes because they are new and can be sold emphasizes Zimbabweans' moral and economic breakdown characterized by wild mercantilism.

The women in *Americanah* and *Juillet au Pays* are also crushed by extreme poverty due to unemployment and hyperinflation. From the beginning of the novel until the very last pages, Rakotoson presents a clear indictment of the State's failure to protect its citizens as reflected in Malagasy women's conditions. Counting the number of paragraphs, pages, and chapters relating women's poverty in the novel would be a tedious endeavor, but some of those excerpts are worth mentioning. One of them is the chapter entitled "The small garage owner." The writer offers a very detailed account of the life of a female small garage owner in Antananarivo and how she lives below the poverty line on a daily basis. Her dwelling and livelihood are "a patch of pavement, embankment, a gas cylinder for rubber vulcanization, four steel sheets serving as a house" (78).[11] The concision of this description perfectly captures the scarcity which characterizes the lives of this woman and her family.

In *Americanah*, "Nigeria's failed promises" (Adichie, *NY Times* n.p.), to borrow the author's terms, can also be seen in the high rate of unemployment and the dereliction of the education system. The impact of Ifemelu's father's joblessness is described with dark humor through the household's dysfunction: unpaid rent, low purchasing power, and the visible malaise of the father. It is important to note how the male characters in the three novels are literally or symbolically weak or absent. There is almost no mention of any male figure except the host who drives the narrator home from the airport in *Juillet au Pays*. In *Americanah* and *We Need New Names*, the heroines' nameless fathers are struck by socio-economic hardship in the same way all women in the communities are. However, they are utterly helpless, unable to take any action to change anything. Darling and Ifemelu's fathers totally depend on the women in their

[11] Original French version: "un bout de trottoir, un talus, une bouteille de gaz pour la vulcanisation du caoutchouc, quatre tôles qui servent de maison"

households for their most basic needs. Men's helplessness in the three novels emphasizes one thing: the heavy burden women have to carry on their own and their resilience.

Indeed, Ifemelu manages to escape from this situation as she enrolls at a Nigerian university, but soon after that, the university goes on strike and closes down. It is this event that directly changes the course of Ifemelu's life. With the help of her aunt, she moves to the United States to receive a decent university education, thus leaving her family, boyfriend, and parts of her dreams behind. The other two main protagonists also leave their countries of origin to find better opportunities in the West. Departure is their way of survival, the subject of the next section.

Women's Resilience in the Three Novels

Sisterhood and Solidarity

In her discussion of women's situations in the face of challenges, Nnaemeka asserts that "victimhood and agency are not mutually exclusive; victims are also agents who can change their lives and affect other lives in radical ways" (3). Indeed, all the three heroines manage to end a part of their tribulations and find some sort of agency. Through major and minor elements, the reader can feel the novels' thrumming pulses, which present myriads of ways for women to survive harsh living conditions.

The most significant of these survival strategies in the novels is female solidarity, as it is the energy that nourishes the narratives. It can first be seen through the acts of mutually alleviating the tasks and duties. As said earlier, Darling's mother in *We Need New Names* does a lot of odd jobs, and it is the grandmother who is in charge of the household and Darling's education. In the same novel, one of the most significant acts of sisterhood and solidarity is the young girls helping their friend Chipo. Chipo, who is pregnant after an incestuous rape, is helped by her friends to have an abortion. Through a poignant scene that serves as a microcosm for the precarious conditions of women in Zimbabwe, the heroine and her friends, who are all adolescents at the time, elaborate a plan to help Chipo put an end to her pregnancy by using dangerous and inefficient means such as herbs and esotery.

Similarly, in *Americanah*, sisterhood and solidarity are essential to the major female characters' survivals and successes. When Uju follows her medical studies, it is her niece who takes care of her son. The heroine's journey itself is shaped by the helpful actions of two female figures: her aunt Uju and Ginika, her former high-school friend. In Nigeria, Aunty Uju acts as a mentor for Ifemelu. When the latter is sick, it is her aunty who advises her to go to a health center and have a pregnancy test (Chapter 6). Later on, when Uju lives in America, she is the one who invites Ifemelu to come and continue her studies there. In the same vein, Ginika keeps "calling and writing letters or sending books" (125) to Ifemelu long after she arrives in the USA. Afterward, when in America, Ifemelu can settle down and survive thanks to Ginika's help. She takes Ifemelu on a visit to the place where she is going to study, gives her moral support, and assists her in finding a job. Ginika's informed advice is indeed crucial to Ifemelu's survival as it enables her to get a job without having to use a "fake name" (146) and thus pay her bills, resume her studies, and have some sort of normal life.

On a similar note, solidarity as a means of survival pervades the pages of *Juillet au Pays*. As presented earlier, right from the beginning of the novel, the author/narrator is struck by the harsh conditions of the Malagasy people. In her opinion, those people manage to survive thanks to one thing: solidarity. As she observes the poverty and the suffering of women, Michèle realizes that those women are still alive because they help one another and that is the only way out: "It is urgent to realize that survival in the future will depend on such reflexes: reflexes based on economy, solidarity, and balanced management"

(110).[12] As Michèle criss-crosses the country and witnesses the women's everyday small actions like doing the laundry in the river of her countryside, she is more convinced of the role of solidarity in their lives. Such a situation reminds her of a song she used to hear during her childhood and which constantly keeps coming back to her mind. She thus decides to use the lines of the song as an epigraph to her memoir: "We will walk together on earth, whether the journey is difficult or easy, we will be holding hands" (68).[13]

On a stylistic level, the three novels also allude to the importance of female solidarity through the hair braiding metaphor. Hair braiding, a key motif in women and gender studies, is generally associated with two main concepts. It can first be seen as a ritualistic process which is "the corporeal equivalent of female bonding that occurs at the same time" (Stone 118). It can also be regarded as an identity marker of the female gender in the Butlerian sense: "the essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (Butler 519). In the three novels, hair braiding can be seen as an act of solidarity because it is not done by oneself but has to be performed by another person, generally a woman. In fact, if braiding is done by another person, it is faster and better done. Braiding can therefore be interpreted as a way of taking care of each other but also of making a woman gain some time, time to rest, time to look and feel good, and time to be used for other things.

In *Americanah*, the story begins with a scene in which, the heroine, Ifemelu, is in the United States and crosses the whole city to find a hair salon specialized in African braiding. The braiding session is indeed a moment for those immigrant women to talk, advise one another on miscellaneous subjects, share joys and pains, and comfort one another. Moreover, prior to Ifemelu's departure to the USA, her aunt advises her to braid her hair, a premonitory piece of advice that predicts the help and female solidarity that the latter will greatly need later in life. In *We Need New Names*, the heroine fondly reminisces how women sat "outside a shack and gossiping and doing one another's hair" (28). Similarly, in *Juillet au Pays*, the very last words of the writer powerfully evoke the image of braiding, which is a necessity for survival: "a regular braiding in which threads are brought together, pulled and crossed" (122).[14]

Like hair strands that make up braids, women in the novels get together, help and support one another in order to preserve their rights or find better opportunities. The idea of solidarity and sisterhood is not new in African literature by women, but the particularity of the novels studied here lies in their representation of transnational sisterhood. The most recurrent motif in the novels is that of an older woman, sometimes an aunt, an older sister, or a mentor who lives in a developed country and who helps another woman to escape from the bankruptcy of her country of origin. Most often, the older lady helps the other one to move to the developed country.

Migration, Awakening, Storytelling, and Agency

One of the most salient points unifying the three novels is that their central female characters leave their countries to settle in the West. First of all, such an action enables the families of the migrant heroines to have a better standard of living, but above all, it is a gateway for new, liberating, and empowering opportunities. Female migration can indeed be violent and disruptive, but in this case, it opens up new and very enriching experiences: awakening, expression, and agency.

As a matter-of-fact, migration involves the loss of the familiar, including culture and social structure, and "grieving for this loss can be viewed as a healthy reaction and a natural consequence of migration" (Bughra and Becker 19). In their own ways, all three heroines experience such a sense of loss and

[12] Original French version: "il est urgent de realiser que la survie à venir dépendra de ces réflexes la: reflexes d'économie, de solidarité et de gestion équilibrée"

[13] Original French version: "Nous marcherons ensemble sur la surface de la terre/ Que cette route soit dure, qu'elle soit facile, nous nous tiendrons par la main"

[14] Original French version: "un tissage régulier [où] on rassemble les fils, on les tire et on les croise"

uprootedness. Those experiences offer the three of them the opportunity to make important realizations regarding their identities.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu awakens to the fact that as a woman of African descent, she is the "Other," and such a situation is painful and unfair. Often regarded as a coming-of-age novel, *Americanah* indeed traces Ifemelu's awakenings. Among the most written about of these awakenings are her discoveries of racial and cultural issues in the United States (Hallemeier 2015; Arabian and Rahiminezhad 2015). As Sackefyio says, the novel traces "an important and uncomfortable dimension of the African immigrant experience [which] is the awareness of racialized identity of blackness as opposed to their ethnic identity from Africa. Adichie candidly expresses these rude awakenings through Ifemelu's odyssey into America's racially defined landscape" (225). In so doing, the writer subtly interweaves countless events that expose the protagonist to her own identity. From everyday micro-aggressions to larger ones, Ifemelu encounters situations that make her feel different, underestimated, and stigmatized because of her race. One of those situations is when she has to relax her hair for a job interview because her braids will make her look "unprofessional" (Chapter 9). Ifemelu's feeling after having her hair relaxed is a telling detail:

> Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. (169)

Ifemelu's most visible identity marker, her hair, here epitomizes the general cultural loss and the resulting bereavement that she experiences as an immigrant. Her hair, which has been modified, treated, and denatured, has been sacrificed in order to express her integration. Moreover, her emotions reveal her incapacity to accept the identity imposed on her by her host country.

Similarly, Michèle's return to Madagascar and the writing of her memoir are tightly linked to identity issues. Indeed, after two decades spent in France, the heroine of *Juillet au Pays* returns to Madagascar, a motif that the writer discusses in an interview published recently. When asked about the intensely nostalgic tone of her writing, Rakotoson evokes the idea of loss inherent to the experience of migration. Her stay has made her realize that she has lost familiarity with her country of origin, that she is now a stranger: "Madagascar had changed. I did not find the country I had left. My memories [...] from before were no longer in phase with the reality I was discovering" (87).[15]

This statement is echoed in the novel by Michèle's realization that her perception of home is different from the one she re-discovers during her trip: "I look at this landscape with a tight throat. Here I am at home, this home that I recreated in wandering, to refuse exile... The landscape of pre-disruption. And if this is what we pompously call roots?" (76).[16] Michèle's sadness is due to her awareness of the fact that she is torn away from her roots but merely has tried to deny it by reconstructing such roots in her own way.

The youngest of the three protagonists, Darling also goes through a consciousness-raising phase. The last chapter of *We Need New Names* presents a pivotal scene capturing Darling's self-perception in relation to her country of origin. She is now schooled in the United States and regularly talks through Skype with her mother. In that scene, she unexpectedly talks to her friend Chipo with whom she has lost contact since

[15] Original French version: "Madagascar avait changé. Je n'ai pas retrouvé le pays que j'avais quitté. Mes souvenirs […] d'avant n'étaient plus en phase avec la réalité que je découvrais"

[16] Original French version: "Je regarde ce paysage la gorge serrée. Ici je suis chez moi, ce chez moi que j'ai recréé dans l'errance, pour refuser l'exil… Le paysage d'avant les déchirements. Et si c'était cela, ce qu'on appelle pompeusement racines?"

her departure. Darling starts the conversation with Zimbabwe's economic breakdown and the people's suffering, but Chipo stops her by saying that, "it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain; it's us who stayed here feeling the suffering, so it's us who have the right to even say anything about that" (287). Chipo then asks her why she has left and bluntly tells her that Zimbabwe is no longer her country: "you have the guts to tell me, in that stupid accent that you were not even born with, that doesn't even suit you that this is your country?" (288). Darling describes her reaction in the following terms: Chipo's "flippant tone totally comes out of nowhere and slaps me in the face, just taking me by surprise. I am so shocked I don't know what to say… I throw the computer, and when I realize what I've done, it is sailing toward the wall" (288). Darling's rage and frustration are apparent in this scene. For the first time, the disruption of her link with the native country is voiced by someone who claims to have such privilege. Her violent reaction is triggered by her refusal to accept the loss of what she considers as her identity, being a Zimbabwean.

The different aspects of awakening traced above are determining factors in the trajectory of the female characters' journeys as they play key roles in their achievement of agency. In the case of Ifemelu in particular, her realizations cumulate in her decision to move back to Nigeria. Most importantly, their consciousness-raising experience has led them to write about their country, to tell their own and their nations' stories. Storytelling indeed symbolizes their agency.

'Agency' can generally be defined as "an individual's ability to act on what he or she considers valuable, actions deemed significant within a particular social or institutional setting" (Morin et al. 15). It is also referred to as an "ability to develop independent thinking and to freely choose to act on one's ideas. It is therefore a skill, ability or capability that is unique to an individual" (Morin et al. 15). In feminist thought, Judith Butler defines it as "the ability to do something with what is made of me" (524). In other words, for Butler, as a subject, the individual is influenced by power relationships on which he/she depends, but on which he/she has the possibility, probably minor, to act upon.

In the three novels, the protagonists' agency is embodied by the act of storytelling. As she lives in the United States, Ifemelu has become a widely-read and influential blog-writer; her posts have thousands of regular visitors every month. In the same vein, as an exile in France, Michèle becomes a writer. The novel is a memoir written by the semi-autobiographical heroine from a third-person point of view. Both female characters achieve agency in the Butlerian sense as they are able to make something out of migration. The failure of their country of origin has pushed them to become immigrants in the West, but they turn this situation into an opportunity to write.

Storytelling is indeed a meaningful act embodying agency for the characters. In feminist tradition, it is a crucial act that "registers survival on two scores—the survival of the storyteller and that of his/her listeners. The storyteller survives to tell the story and his/her listeners survive because they learned from the story" (Nnaemeka 7). Indeed, for the three heroines in the novels, it does not merely imply self-discovery and revelation, but it is also a militant act. In *Americanah*, blogging is mainly used as a space of opinion expression on personal as well as social experiences. As Ifemelu's boyfriend says, "Remember people are not reading you as entertainment; they're reading you as cultural commentary. That's a real responsibility" (521). As a matter of fact, Ifemelu's comments are mainly about racial issues in America, but they also offer critical viewpoints about Nigerian culture and society. One significant example is Ifemelu's posting about "young women in Lagos with Unknown Sources of Wealth" (521). It is a harsh criticism of how some women in Nigeria are kept by their lovers. In *Juillet au Pays*, the memoir Michèle writes is a tribute to the courage of the Malagasy women that could not leave the country (8). One of those women literally asks the narrator to write about her story so that the world knows it: "Tell our life

story, Madam, tell it in France" (119).[17] Thus the narrator openly criticizes the weight of poverty on Malagasy women, and the last words of the memoir are a plea for social justice: "we are looking for fairness and justice" (208).[18]

In *We Need New Names*, Darling is not a confirmed writer the way Michèle and Ifemelu are, but she has the same amazing storytelling capacities. Indeed, Darling is the omniscient narrator of the story, a fact that results in a narrative "charged with honesty from the perspective of a black-female-child, who holds no ulterior motive but to tell a story from a person that is underrepresented and overlooked" (Fitzpatrick 5). Thus, the novel puts the same importance on the motif of a heroine who relates her journey from oppression to agency by narrating the whole events. Moreover, even though Darling is younger than the other two heroines, the stories she chooses to tell convey equally militant messages. One of the most significant of them is that of Chipo, which was presented earlier in this paper. By talking about Chipo's pregnancy and attempted abortion, Darling opens up a space "to acknowledge Chipo and speak about the larger implications of gender violence in Zimbabwe" (Fitzpatrick 20).

Conclusions

To conclude, it is necessary to return to the question that initially spurred this study. We tried to find out, first of all, how contemporary prize-winning novels depict African women's conditions. The representation we get is deeply embedded in society and politics. The three novels present African women first as victims of State failure characterized by unemployment, education breakdown, and extreme poverty. Thus, they have to find ways to survive. Adichie, Bulawayo, and Rakotoson perpetuate African women's literary tradition by insisting on the importance of solidarity as a strategy of survival. The new element they bring to the tradition is the assertion that such solidarity is more efficient if it transcends generations and national borders. The outcome of transnational solidarity as expressed in the novels is migration, an experience that is at the same time empowering and characterized by paradoxical realities of identity crises. That phase of their journeys determines their ultimate form of agency as it leads to writing. Beyond the paper's main focus, the comparative analysis of those three novels also drives home the idea of the universality of women's experiences. Despite their contextual background, culture, language, and generation differences, the three writers evoke the same issues that speak to many women in the Global South. In their own way, each writer also imparts an important message: the resilience of women is essential to the survival of the community itself.

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Re-Visioning Deer Woman

Abstract: "Evolution is a beautiful thing. To witness something grow, change, and move forward—is sacred," says Patty Stonefish in her introduction to *Deer Woman: An Anthology*, a 2017 comic book edited by Elizabeth LaPensée and Weshoyot Alvitre. The Native works discussed in this article re-contextualize Deer Woman, a spirit found in the oral traditions of many Native American nations. They use literature and "sequential art" (Lee Francis IV) as vehicles for retelling old stories in a contemporary setting, have myth live on, and keep tradition alive and valid, rather than lodged in the past, "adding new layers of growth […] just as living trees do" (Bruchac 8). Non-Native cultural products continue to display the tension between "fixity" and "repeatability" (Bhabha 94-95) in the monstrous representation of the "Indian," a product of the "wétiko" (cannibalistic) impulse of colonialism and patriarchy (Forbes 22). Multiple Native voices "revision"/"re-vision" (Osborn 261) Deer Woman to articulate criticism of the colonially-rooted construction of the Indigenous and employ her tricksterism to subvert static meaning and reclaim sovereignty.

Keywords: Native American, sovereignty, Deer Woman, monster, trickster, "re-vision"

Introduction

Reclaiming sovereignty is the focus of contemporary Indigenous America's decolonial project. Back in the 1990s, Robert Warrior was writing: "If our struggle is anything, it is the struggle for sovereignty, and if sovereignty is anything, it is a way of life" (123). Warrior was arguing for the recovery of American Indian intellectual traditions, as the title of his book stated upfront. This was not about rejecting everything "outside of [...] [Indigenous] cultures" in response to the dominance of "the intellectual strategies and categories of white, European thought"; rather than an 'either/or' relationship, Warrior envisaged the Native "struggle for sovereignty" to be "a process of asserting the power we [Indigenous people] possess as communities and individuals" (123-124). Warrior explicitly declined to explain the meaning he assigned to the term "process"; it is, then, to be understood in light of his idea of "intellectual sovereignty" and of related concepts by other authors. Warrior's discussion of the work of Vine Deloria Jr. reveals "intellectual sovereignty" as a "transformative practice" (Cobb 127) implying Native "emergence" (Warrior 89). Deloria had called for "the return to Native ceremonies and traditions within a framework of asserting sovereignty" (qtd. in Warrior 88). The "traditional revitalization"[19] Deloria urged for was to be understood in terms of "American Indians ['realization] that the power of those traditions is not in their formal superiority [to Western ones] but in their adaptability to new challenges" (Warrior 94). Deloria argued that power went hand in hand with the responsibility toward community: "The responsibility which sovereignty creates is oriented primarily toward the existence and continuance of the group" (Deloria, *We Talk* 123). A Native process of emergence is to be seen as everyday practice, informed by tradition, in the various, interrelated spheres of community life, including the literary and artistic creation. This resonates

[19] Robert Warrior's comment on Deloria's work emphasizes the double role the latter assigns to tradition: a standpoint from which to critique the Native Americans' destructive colonial past and the ground on which the building of a future is possible: "First, he [Deloria] contended, the affirmation of tradition provides the necessary raising of consciousness among those who have been taught that the ways of their ancestors were barbaric, pagan, and uncivilized. Second, tradition provides the critical constructive material upon which a community rebuilds itself" (Warrior, *Tribal Secrets* 95).

with the concept of "communitism" developed by Jace Weaver, who explicitly connects it to Warrior's "intellectual sovereignty" and Gerald Vizenor's "survivance." Weaver's neologism, which combines the meanings of *community* and *activism*, suggests Native writers' engagement with the sites of colonial(ist) aggression—land, (hi)story, community.[20]

Contemporary Native American writers and artists revisit traditional narratives of their cultures, recasting them in present-day contexts. Their storytelling as decolonizing methodology continues, in a "(post)colonial" environment[21] (Cheyfitz 3), a Native heritage of resistance to (cultural) dominance through "asserting humanity" by affirming "the connections between being human and being capable of creating history, knowledge and society" (Tuhiwai Smith 26). It also reflects (on) tradition's ability to inspire robust and empowering responses to today's individual and community crises. The creative act is closely connected to sovereignty; storytelling links individuals to communities and communities to worldviews and their places of lived practice.

This article looks at several non-Native and Native-produced cultural texts to explore the continuity of the colonialist perspective in the representation of the "Indian"[22] and how contemporary Indigenous writers and artists recenter the Indigenous in their storytelling. More specifically, it focuses on the treatment of Deer Woman, a supernatural being found in the traditional narratives of many Native American tribes. While the non-Native cultural product makes Deer Woman a monster, thus evincing the colonial(ist) impulse of consuming the Indigenous, which Jack Forbes, with a concept familiar to several Native cultures, names *wétiko* disease, the Native works discussed here interpret Deer Woman as symbolic of the Indigenous worldviews, predicated on an inherent democracy stemming from their sense of "creatureness of all creation" (Deloria, *God Is Red* 89).

Consuming Deer Woman: The "*Wétiko* Disease" Creates Monsters

In an article for the Pioneer Woman Museum in Ponca City, Oklahoma, Keith Woodstock Fagan lists Deer Woman among supernatural evil creatures, along with West Virginia's Mothman and the Jersey Devil. While Fagan refers to Deer Woman's role in maintaining "cultural taboos," he—very tellingly—evokes the myth "[i]n honor of Halloween" and calls her "Oklahoma's regional 'Boogieman' of choice" (n.p.).

The movie *Deer Woman*, directed by John Landis and aired in 2005 as an episode of the *Masters of Horror* television series, follows the pattern of appropriating Deer Woman as a devilish creature in non-Native America's popular imagination. It dramatizes the myth as the horror story of a shapeshifting monster who, in the guise of a beautiful woman, seduces and violently kills four men, including a police officer who assists in the investigation of this serial murder case. A truck driver, a businessman, and a storekeeper are killed, trampled beyond recognition, and tension builds around the question of who might have committed the murders. The attacker's destructive force seems hardly possible in a person, and detective Faraday wonders: "*What* the hell could do that?" (8:49; my emphasis). A witness remembers

[20] "Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community, including […] the 'wider community' of Creation itself. In communities that have too often been fractured and rendered dysfunctional by the effects of 500 years of colonialism, to promote communitist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them" (Weaver, *That the People Might Live* xiii).

[21] Eric Cheyfitz places "post" within parentheses "to register the particularity of the ongoing colonial regime in Indian country, where Native citizens of the United States are simultaneously colonized citizens of Indian nations" (3).

[22] I use the word "Indian" here within inverted commas in acknowledgment of numerous scholars having shown that besides misnaming the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, it stands for an invention, its referent constructed in deliberate distortion of the Native, as Louis Owens suggests by using the tropes of the "mask" and "mirror"; my every use of the term within this article should be understood in this sense.

the trucker had left Morgan's Tavern & Grill with an Indian woman with "sharp features, perfectly carved" (10:26) and with yellow eyes, "like a deer caught in the headlights of your car" (11:09). The man makes lustful remarks on the woman's attractiveness: "She was just a real sexy woman. One of those you'd look at and all you could think was—man, I got to hit that" (10:41-10:48). Detective Faraday discovers deer footprints at the crime scenes, and the killings are provisionally deemed "animal attacks" (11:54). The forensic pathologist discloses that the men had died "in a state of arousal" (16:19), and later finds deer DNA on the victims' remains. While having lunch at the River Rock Native American casino, detective Faraday discusses the case with officer Reed. A Native bartender overhears the conversation, approaches the officers, and tells them the story of Deer Woman. At social gatherings, she:

> […] would come out of the woods and slip unnoticed into the party. She's like the most beautiful woman in the world, really sexy, built like a goddess from the waist up, but from the waist down, she's like a deer. […] Oh, you know, she has deer legs. […] Anyways, she comes into the party and she finds a guy. She lures him somewhere secluded […] and tramples him to death. (44:37-45:07)

No one notices her deer legs because she keeps them covered up, and, most importantly, she cannot be caught or killed. When, later, officer Reed returns to the casino to enjoy himself, a beautiful woman shows up, charms him, and Reed goes home with her. When Faraday calls to discuss their case further, Reed brags about the night's hot promises. Then he suddenly realizes he has not seen the woman's feet…

In an article on Indigenous "indigestible bodies," Jill Carter describes First Nations Two-Spirit artist Otsíkh:èta (Candy Blair)'s street performance outside the Center for Indigenous Theatre in Toronto, Canada. Blair was lying in the street, "[d]onning a blood-soaked bra and loincloth, and accessorizing these with requisite headband and feather." The fact that "only one passerby stopped to express concern"—Carter comments—"is a disturbingly familiar story" (225-226). The Indigenous woman is ignored in her actual existence, historical and contemporary, her only visibility allowed within the framework of stereotypical representation, as Candy Blair suggests by naming their performance project *I'm Not Your Pocahontas*.

When early travelers to the New World sensationally described "Indian" women to go about naked and "urged by excessive lust" (Vespucci, qtd. in Berkhofer 24), the evil version of the "savage" Native woman was born. Robert Berkhofer points to the dual significance of the term, suggesting a state of natural innocence, and also "referring to what was uncanny, unruly, raw, unpredictable, foreign […]. It included the unfamiliar as well as the unintelligible" (30-31). The distorted image of the "Indian," portrayed from the beginning in "benign and hostile" tones (Bataille 3), was incorporated into "the sacred story of America" (Wheelock 114)—a "saga" constructed along the lines of myth while suppressing and discrediting Native mythologies as primitive ways of looking at, and being in the world. It produced the "major supporting roles" allowed to the Indian: either the "antagonist, an enemy for people to overcome on the way to their destiny" or the "Noble Redman" (Wheelock 115) whose sense of freedom, distinctiveness from Europe, and connection with the American land were to be exploited by the colonial settler who "played Indian" (Philip Deloria) in order to build an "indigeneity" (Weaver, "Indigenousness and Indigeneity" 221) that stripped the Native of Nativeness and replaced it with "the mask […] of the 'Indian' Other" (Owens 17). Similarly, the Native woman's representation shifted from the "Indian queen" carrying "implements of war and postured near severed heads and exotic plants and animals," an allegory of the foreignness and hostility of the New World ("Indian Queens," n.p.) to the "Indian princess," an iconic representation of the American colonies, emphasizing their separateness from Europe, and a symbol of the "wild" land and people's acquiescence to the American project, a myth later perpetuated in the

media.[23] Such a career of the Native woman is a journey from Deer Woman to Pocahontas or, rather, a combination of the two, with the brutish and noble savagery ingredients blended together in variable amounts to achieve the flavor to best suit the mainstream's interests and needs of the day.

In Landis's movie, the Native is constructed as a digestible body, the Indigenous woman's "savagery" suggested in intellectual and sexual terms. She is completely voiceless but just smiles invitingly. She wears a long skirt to hide her deer legs and a single-buttoned top to expose her breasts (which she does) to the lustful men, who unsuspectingly get ready to "consume" her for her exoticism. She violently murders them for no apparent reason. What the movie offers for the viewer to consume is not primarily the nudity of the sexually objectified Indigenous body, but rather, the Native woman as a "monstrous other" (Thomson, qtd. in Carter 226). The movie resonates with the Indian captivity narrative, one root of the American Gothic,[24] and seems to have sought commercial success by using the same recipe: "much of the appeal of Indian captivity narratives resides in […] that they are accounts of horrific violence […] and in some cases of supernatural figures and events" (Sivils 85).

According to Charles Crow,

> [f]ar from being a footnote to our [American] literary tradition, the Gothic is now seen as essential to understanding our literature, and indeed our national project. The dominant, sanctioned history of the United States has been a narrative of […] progress. This narrative also asserts the doctrine of American exceptionalism, the belief that the country's essential innocence and destiny place it above the constraints and judgments of other nations and history. In contrast to this triumphant story, the Gothic is a counter-narrative, an alternative vision, recording fear, failure, despair, nightmare, crime, disease, and madness. […] The Gothic thus is the natural medium for the expression of our great national failures and crimes, such as the enslavement of Africans and the displacement and destruction of indigenous peoples. (xviii)

An exploration of the representation of Deer Woman in John Landis's movie as a contemporary Indian captivity narrative resonates with Cohen's proposed "*modus legendi*: a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender" (3).[25]

Cohen argues that the monster is born at cultural intersections and "exists only to be read" (4). While monsters are to be interpreted "within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them" (5), they encapsulate anxieties that always return in different forms and contexts. Indian captivity narratives reflect "the horrors of the American colonial project" and are "a literature of intersecting borderlands and failed repression, of a haunted national psyche, which […] is the cultural haunting formed by centuries of injustices against Native Americans" (Sivils 85). *Deer Woman*

[23] For a discussion of the stereotypical representation of the "Indian" in Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995), see, for example, Cornel Pewewardy's article "The Pocahontas Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for Educators."

[24] Matthew Wynn Sivils discusses how the Indian captivity narratives distinguished the American Gothic from its "European antecedents." He argues that, "[w]hen we look […] for influences from the American side of the Atlantic, for texts that helped provide the ingredients for a new American take on the Gothic, we find we must give considerable credit to the Indian captivity narrative. This melding of Indian captivity tales, local history, wilderness environments, and select conventions of European works resulted in Frontier Gothic, […] not only […] a distinctive American literary genre but—as it slowly evolved into the Western—would come to embody the myth of America itself" (84).

[25] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen proposes seven theses to orient a reading of cultures based on the teratologies they develop: thesis i) "the monster's body is a cultural body" (4); ii) "the monster always escapes" (5); iii) "the monster is the harbinger of category crisis" (6); iv) "the monster dwells at the gates of difference" (7); v) "the monster polices the borders of the possible" (12); vi) "fear of the monster is really a kind of desire" (16); and vii) "the monster stands at the threshold … of becoming" (20).

movie's return, in a different form, to the theme of white America's conflict with the "Indian" seems to translate an anxiety located at the basis of the settler experience: "one fundamental truth emerges: the white man knows that he is alien and he knows that North America is Indian—and he will never let go of the Indian image because he thinks by some clever manipulation he can achieve an authenticity which can never be his" (Deloria Jr., qtd. in Weaver, "Indigenousness and Indigeneity" 228).

Cohen's theses posit the monster as an imaginary embodiment of the mixed and the different. The monster's "disturbing hybrid[ity]" is the reason why it escapes and returns to a liminality which is "a […] conceptual locus rather than a geographic one" (6). In Landis's movie, the shapeshifting woman/ deer disappears into thin air, a monster that "always escapes" (Cohen 5), after detective Faraday fails to kill her by shooting her and hitting her with his car; she leaves the policeman wondering under his breath—"Animal attack, huh?" Deer Woman defies boundaries of the normal (normative) in her shape and as a legal body, since she cannot be contained (like a criminal), and vanishes into the uncanny space of the woods lying at the limits of the city. The movie echoes the Indian captivity narrative by representing Deer Woman and, by extension, the Native as the inhabitant of the wilderness constructed in opposition to civilization's space. Cohen observes that "[t]he exaggeration of cultural difference into monstrous aberration" (7) results in the construction of the racial Other as abnormal, the deficiency "quickly moralized through a pervasive rhetoric of deviance" (10).[26] In *Deer Woman*, the cruelty of savage Indians is suggested by quick glimpses onto the mutilated bodies of the victims, the contrast with the beauty of the woman and the innocence of the deer making it even more horrifying. The "Indian" is thus criminalized, with a gesture which revives the old image of Indian cannibalism, originating with Columbus, vividly imagined in Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, and further transmuted into the hostile Indian type in later literature and film.

According to Cohen, "one kind of alterity is often written as another, so that national difference […] is transformed into sexual difference" (10). In *Deer Woman*, the monster consumes white men who represent American values of individualism, entrepreneurship, adventure spirit, and success, as well as the black policeman—as sometimes happens in captivity narratives which "relate the abduction of African Americans" (Sivils 84); in this case, the black man is co-opted, a guardian of mainstream values, a member of the law and order force.[27] The movie renders the Native *as* radical, unintelligible, irrational (the killings without a motive), menacing otherness. Deer Woman's monstrosity resides in her (and the Indigenous woman's) outsideness from the normative national patriarchy. For all her voicelessness, she takes agency and becomes an abductress by turning the men's sense of entitlement to (sexually) use the (exotic Indigenous) woman as the opportunity presents itself into a liability, thus becoming scary. In fact, she is

[26] Cohen speaks of "transforming [the Other] into demonic caricatures" (8), while Sivils references "Indian captivity narratives [as] propagandistic in nature, relating in sickening detail torments levied by devilish caricatures of American Indians, who take great pleasure in horrendous acts of violence" (85-86). The constructed savagery of the Native was intended to "rationalize the systematic […] oppression of indigenous peoples" (Sivils 86) so that the "political machine of Manifest Destiny could push westward with disregard" (Cohen 8).

[27] Officer Reed's construction reminds of the trope of the deficient black man: his stupidity, inadequacy for the profession, and moral weakness are a source of humor. The fact that the movie is a comedy horror does not disguise its reliance on stereotypical racial otherness. I also allude here to how other contemporary entertainment products, namely Western-themed video games, perpetuate the myth of the American westward expansion as a civilizing mission of turning wilderness into a land of laws, for example, in the immensely successful *Red Dead Redemption II* (Rockstar Games, 2018).

represented as twice monstrous: an Indigenous "woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role" (Cohen 9), the two features overlapping; she is a "wild woman" (Van Dyke 2).[28]

The "fear of the monster is really a kind of desire" (Cohen 16). The sexual attraction Deer Woman in Landis's movie has on men translates the fact that

> […] the monster can function as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self. The monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body, to the fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening […]. We watch the monstrous spectacle of the horror film because we know that the cinema is a temporary place […] followed by reentry into the world of comfort […]. (Cohen 17)

Deer Woman renders the Indigenous woman an object to stimulate nightmarish fantasy, like Candy Blair's comment suggests: "I was wondering if they sold Indian costumes for Halloween in sex stores" (qtd. in Carter 225). The carnivalesque serves to reinforce the normative. The "Indian" is used as a "monstrous spectacle," with an understanding that "reentry into the world of comfort" from which s/he must be absent follows as soon as the movie ends.

If Deer Woman cannot be domesticated—caught or killed, the Native bartender *is* assimilated, colonized in his mind;[29] he is turned into a male Pocahontas—"the white man's Indian."[30] He remembers Deer Woman from family storytelling—"[H]ere's the story how my daddy used to tell it" (44:30), but he does not relate to it: "it's just a story" (45:10), and her "motive [for killing men] is not at issue here" (45:23). The movie invites the viewer to consume the Native Other(ed) in both evil and benign versions—Deer Woman and the bartender—and stimulates voyeurism as the gaze focusing back onto the viewing subject, a non-Indigenous audience "spoonfed" (Cook-Lynn 29) to the invented image of the "Indian."

"Monsters are our children. […] They ask us why we have created them" (Cohen 20). The construction of Deer Woman in John Landis's movie evidences symptoms of the "wétiko psychosis" (Forbes 22), a metaphor Jack Forbes used for the insanity of colonialism and patriarchy. Landis's *Deer Woman* displays the cannibalistic[31] act of representing the Indigenous woman as wild, monstrous for her double difference, and offering her for (cultural) "self-serving consumption" (Forbes 26).

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[28] For Annette Van Dyke, the "wild woman" is "any woman seen as being in control of herself." She uses the "lesbian"—"the woman-centered woman"—not in sexual terms, but as a counter-metaphor to the "virgin"—the woman "under the control of men" (2). Her definition of the "wild woman" is informed by Native "woman-centered spiritual traditions," in contrast with the "Euro-American perspective of women as weak and submissive" (1). Van Dyke's view resonates with Lora Tohe's famous formulation—"There is no word for feminism in my language"—suggesting that, cultural differences considered, in Native American traditional worldviews "[f]emaleness was highly valued […] and all social institutions reflected that attitude" (Gunn Allen, "Who Is Your Mother?" 31). A "gynocracy" (Paula Gunn Allen's term) does not imply the woman's dominance, but equality between, and respect for persons and gender roles, rooted in recognizing each human and non-human's place and responsibility within the whole of creation.

[29] Gloria Bird refers to "the successful colonization of our [Native] minds" to suggest Indigenous people's internalization of colonial representations which occupy the space of Native authenticity and displace it in favor of a self-image of the Indigenous as "Othered and vanishing" (1).

[30] This phrase is the title of Robert Berkhofer's classic study about the appropriation of the "Indian" in the colonial(ist) discourse.

[31] In his book *Columbus and Other Cannibals. The Wétiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism*, Jack Forbes uses the metaphor of cannibalism—"the consuming of another's life for one's own private purpose or profit"—as the symptom of "*wétikowatisewin*" (24). The term, existing in several Native languages, names the human impulse to exploit and oppress another, a form of insanity that implies disrespect of the sacred interconnection of "all forms of life" (22). Forbes uses the concept to characterize colonialism and any act of defining

Re-visioning Deer Woman: A Figure of Native Sovereignty

Deer Woman as a monster expresses the "eroticization and marginalization of Native women to fulfill colonial fantasies of power" (Lee Francis IV, Publisher Introduction to *Deer Woman: An Anthology*). Such a representation implies the objectification of the Indigenous woman in a manner similar to the interpretation of Indigenous land as a formless wilderness to be conquered and shaped according to the colonizer's project. This process is equivalent to pornography in the sense of disjoining the body from its relationalities that constitute its personhood and turning it into a thing; "[t]he pornographic gaze of othering and colonization is all about disconnecting people from the land. […] What happens to the land, what happens to the water, happens to my [Indigenous] body" (Monique Mojica, *NOW Magazine*, n.p.). Native women's struggle as scholars, artists, activists, and community members, whether they call themselves feminists or reject this label, is primarily about reclaiming the validity of Indigenous worldviews *as* knowledge, stemming from the lived practice of the connection between Native people and Native land. Wilson Bellacoola finds that contemporary Native American women are more concerned with survival than sexism, which they see "as an extension of the colonial pattern of domination" (17). Their struggle is primarily for sovereignty, and in that, they do not "necessarily [see] dividing lines between [Indigenous] women's and men's issues"; "a return to the old ways and a return of their land base are [their] most pressing concerns" (18). Paula Gunn Allen noted that Indigenous traditions were "more often gynocratic than not" (*Sacred Hoop* 17), with a reverence for the woman as "Creatrix," rather than a "simple fertility cultism" (2, 27). The reclamation of traditional ways, which see gender roles and responsibilities in complementarity and balance, without the domination of either, distinguishes the political aims of Indigenous feminism.

I borrow the terms "revision" and "re-vision," on which Susan Osborn built her feminist writing class. While Osborn concerned herself with masculinist and feminist models "of conceiving the writing process" (260), I use the terms, which she also borrowed from other authors, to refer to the production and reading of the Indigenous *as* text. Following Florence Howe, Osborn sees "revision as an ongoing […] process continually employed by writers to make meaning of texts, both those read and those written" (261). She agrees with Adrienne Rich that re-vision "is the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction," which for women "is an act of survival" (Rich, qtd. in Osborn 261). Osborn views revision and re-vision as methodologies of meaning-making:

> Both […] revision and re-vision are processes of clarification, discovery, and recovery. […] Both processes require an examination of old texts, a repositioning of self in relation to the subject, and a reentering of those old representations from a new critical direction. […] Both processes require a transformation in accustomed ways of thinking and involve not just a crossing out of old words, but the development of new concepts, new relational paradigms, new symbolic solutions that make meaning of our experience. (261)

Along these lines, Deer Woman, as represented in the works discussed below, is a figure of Indigenous recovery of sovereignty in the textual space. Their authors "re-vision" Deer Woman by re-contextualizing traditional tales in contemporary settings and "re-activat[ing her] from her traditional places in Native oral stories and her encoded, visual representations in petroglyphs, winter counts, birchbark scrolls, and animal hides to envision […] healing from ongoing legacies" (Anderson 317) of violence against Indigenous land and people.

If the Native bartender in the *Deer Woman* movie claims there is no motive for her violent intervention, or that it is pointless to look for one, Carolyn Dunn explains that in the Indigenous traditions

(Indigenous) people, land, and women as wild for their difference, to justify physical and cultural brutality, thus seeing colonialism and male dominance as closely interlinked.

that have her, Deer Woman is one of the Little People, spirits whose role is to "keep us in line" precisely *because* they "can be sinister," with a monstrous dimension. The Deer Woman's myth—where "myth" does not "connote falsehood," but a way of being in the world, transmitted through oral storytelling—has to do with courtship, marriage, and gender roles and responsibilities within the community "in order for cultural survival and regeneration." Deer Woman's "tales are morality narratives." The Little People, Carolyn Dunn says, "teach us to do just that: use our power in a good way or else we will be lost" ("Deer Woman and the Living Myth of Dreamtime" n.p.). In the context of traditional Indigenous thought, Deer Woman as a "vehicle of prohibition" (Cohen 15) functions to prevent (sexual) transgression which would abuse the principle of respect for all beings, rooted in the sense of what Deloria called "creatureness," the status of humans and non-humans having proceeded from the same creational act. Selfishness, expressed in sexual terms in Deer Woman stories, damages the community's well-being.

The story "Deer Woman" by Paula Gunn Allen begins abruptly: "Two young men were out snagging one afternoon" (17). The story is marked by the paratactic formulation of the traditional oral storytelling, which leaves it to the audience to link cause to effect and understand the lesson. Ray and Jackie cruise about the area in their car, enter a bar and "lift a few beers" (17), then meet another Native man who asks them if they are headed to the stomp dance; they answer in the affirmative, "though truth to tell, they hadn't known there was a stomp dance in the area that night" (17). They commit two violations of the traditional ways: one is "snagging"—approaching women for the sole purpose of a sexual affair, objectifying them in this manner; the other is their attitude to the stomp dance, a ceremony with religious and social functions practiced in the "contact zone"[32] (Pratt 8) after the Muscogee Green Corn Ceremony was banished by the government as a "heathen" ritual. The young men attend it just for entertainment—"They were among their own, and they were satisfied with their lives and themselves" (18)—disregarding the ceremonial. They spot two beautiful women dancing, and "something about them—something elusive—made Ray shiver with a feeling almost like recognition, and at the same time, like dread" (18). It is the fear and fascination[33] involved in the encounter with the sacred, which ceremony *is* about, and which the two men so casually ignore. As Linda and Junella approach the men and ask for a ride, the roles are reversed: the women "snag" the men, who are so elated that they quickly dismiss the fugitive image of deer feet. Ray is amazed by his "untypical pliability" (19) to the women's requests but does not realize that he and Jackie are being taught a lesson in gender balance and that ceremony *is* about restoring balance.

The women lead Ray and Jackie to a strange place in the forest, populated—very appropriately because they are suggested to be spirits—by "people whose faces never seemed to come quite into focus" (22). A man who "seemed ancient" (21) appears, accompanied by thunder rumbling. Ray and Jackie fail to recognize the Thunder of traditional stories, with whom the people have a sacred covenant from mythical time, and whose intervention—which Kurt Russow argues is based on the principle of reciprocity governing the universe in Native worldviews—is intended to restore the right kind of relationships. The older man introduces the women as his nieces, and the young men rediscover them for who they are: "Their long, flowing hair was gone, and their heads shone in the soft light that filled the area allowing distant features to recede into its haze. […] Their dark eyes seemed huge and luminous against skin that somehow gave off a soft radiance. Seeing them, both men were nearly overcome with fear" (21-22).

The women resemble ceremonial masks, and their otherworldliness shakes the men's colonized minds, which content themselves with shadowy lives of alcoholism and dismissal of traditional ways. The older man invites Ray and Jackie to play baseball, a detail which suggests that the traditional can coexist

[32] Pratt's concept of "contact zone" is well-known; it refers to the space of cultural intersections which colonialism created and which involves "copresence, interaction," improvisation, "often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (8).

[33] I am using here Rudolf Otto's concepts (*mysterium tremendum*, *mysterium fascinans*) in his analysis of the sacred.

with the contemporary, and indeed it must—for the Native to rebuild a meaningful existence. Ray falls asleep and wakes up in plain daylight, outside the mysterious place he had visited, to see one of the women holding Jackie's wristwatch out to him—a reminder of this spiritual journey from which Jackie does not return to the world governed by time. We learn that Jackie might have come home with one of the two women as his wife, they might have separated, and it appears that he became an alcoholic and might have died for having failed to keep the secret about the encounter with Deer Woman. Ray's remark—"Maybe those old guys know something, eh?"—made "with a look somehow wounded and yet with a kind of wild hope mixed in" (24) reveals the story of the Deer Woman as valid in its fundamental teaching, if not literally true.

Paula Gunn Allen's story offers a "revision" of the Deer Woman myth resonant with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's concepts of "*re*writing and *re*righting" (28) the Native. Hers is a narrative of ceremonial recovery, for Ray reconnects with cultural traditions to which he had "never paid much attention" (24) before. Gunn Allen subverts the "Indian" (as old) text by exposing the colonialist-patriarchal "*wétikowatisewin*" to be responsible for the decay of Native masculinity through internalization of the image of the savage "Indian" who must vanish from history, resulting in a deleterious complacency with this othered identity, as well as for the "gynocidal assaults" (*Sacred Hoop* 25) on Indigenous women. Retold in a contemporary context, the story claims a new validity for "the way of our grandmothers" (*Sacred Hoop* 24) and is thus an instance of tricksterism, resonant with Harry Fonseca's representation (in the *Juggler IV*, 1988 painting) of Coyote as a juggler, in a clown's outfit, in a bar setting, maintaining the balance of objects and movement in dance.[34] The trickster, in Gerald Vizenor's interpretation, is a figure of resistance and "survivance"—survival and presence, a "liberator and healer" (*Narrative Chance* 187). To him, the trickster is not an actual character, but rather "a semiotic sign"—a way of making sense, which "summons agonistic imagination" against "tragic terminal creeds" (188) and signifies "chance" (189).

Jonathan Thunder represented Deer Woman as a trickster in his painting *Deer Woman Gets a Manicure*[35]—in a contemporary outfit and showing her freshly-painted nails, against a background of intersecting vegetal stalks carrying ladybugs, to suggest regeneration and new significances. He also did some of the art in *Deer Woman: An Anthology*—a collection of stories by established and emerging Indigenous artists in response to the multiple abuse Native American women suffer in the form of rape, domestic violence, and trafficking in persons, a continued "gynocide" through the objectification of the "wild Indian" woman for *wétiko* consumption. A staggering number of cases go unnoticed and/ or unpunished.[36] The collection combines the "oral impulse" and the "graphic impulse" (Teuton, *Deep Waters*, n.p.), which have always coexisted within the Native traditions, and use the non-Native medium

[34] Maidu painter Harry Fonseca's Coyote series represent this mythical character in line with its traditional type of energy: "one can only survive in a chaotic and often adverse universe by the use of subversive intelligence and the cathartic power of laughter" (Castillo 8). The trickster is hybrid, questions and transgresses established borders, binaries, and hierarchies; it challenges the orderly and the static. A figure of renewal, the trickster Coyote appealed to Fonseca's sense of re-indigenizing the Indigenous in a non-traditional, urban, "off the rez" setting: "My Coyote paintings are, for me, the most contemporary statements I have made in regard to traditional beliefs and contemporary reality" (Fonseca, in Confluences of Tradition and Change/ 24 American Indian Artists. Davis: University of California, 1981, qtd. on Heard Museum Guild's website—https://www.heardguild.org/thats-way-like-label-copy/); the painting can be viewed at http://www.harryfonseca.com/Coyotes/Coyotes/juggler%20IV.html

[35] The painting can be viewed at https://thunderfineart.com/index.php/127-2/. Accessed: 3 June 2021.

[36] For a discussion of these contemporary realities and of the Indigenous literary/ symbolic and practical responses to them, see, for example, Joshua T. Anderson's article quoted in this paper.

of the comic book to claim a space of signification in which the "critical impulse" (Teuton) works to challenge the imagery and authority of the dominant cultural discourse.[37]

In "Deer Woman: A Vignette" (writer Elizabeth LaPensée, artist Jonathan R. Thunder), the Native victim of rape and human trafficking not only refuses the status of the victim—a "terminal creed" in Vizenor's language—but turns against the aggressors of other women, casting the shadow of Deer Woman whose destructive/creative ambivalence transmutes agony into regeneration: "In that one moment when it's already too late, what could I do? Survive. Transform. So that it never happens again. To anyone" (n.p.). She directs her deer eye toward the aggressor and viewer(s), holding them in her gaze, refusing to be transformed into a digestible body. After she kills a sexual predator, she is represented facing the reader against a cracked wall with freshly grown vegetation and a ladybug, its color matching the red of blood in previous panels, as if ready to raise her arms and hold the whole world in a redeeming embrace.

In "Mama" (art and story by Jackie Fawn), inspired by the life of Julie "Mama Julz" Richards, the Lakota founder of the Mothers Against Meth Alliance, we see a woman saved from the hands of a drug dealer by a family—a harsh mother and her adult children. As they return the woman to her home, we realize that this victim is actually the Deer Woman, whose classic story inspires contemporary woman warriors; when her sister comes out to welcome her, we see their deer legs and antlers, and the former victim says: "I'm fine sis. Just out on patrol with some wolves." Deer Woman inspires awareness and regenerative action to counter the ravages of substance abuse, which are effects of, and ways to cope with the regime of Othering the Indigenous as "savage"[38]: "When we, as marginalized Others, internalize and portray our inferiority […], we become a sort of 'self-fulfilling prophecy,' as we provide the dominant culture with evidence to support our continued objectification, disempowerment, and exploitation" (Poupart 90).

The fact that Mama and her children participate in what seems to be one of the 2016 protests against the Dakota Access pipeline on the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota suggests how the Deer Woman symbolism links, like Monique Mojica (quoted above) argued, the politics of the Indigenous body and the politics of land. Regaining sovereignty means re-placing both within the Native traditional web of respectful connections.

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[37] Teuton criticizes the orality/literacy binary in which Indigenous cultures occupy the lesser position for being characterized as "oral." He relies on Cherokee stories to claim that orality is not a sign of primitivism but a conscious cultural choice that preserves the group's democratic, collective meaning-making. He also uses Derrida's "critique of logocentrism," which Barbara Johnson views as reflective of "an unacknowledged, or 'repressed,' graphocentrism" (qtd. in Teuton) to deconstruct "ideologically loaded binaries that privilege the West and denigrate the Indigenous Other." Teuton develops "a theory of Indigenous signification that values both oral and graphic means of recording thought, but privileges neither." The *oral impulse* "refers to the way texts invoke the cultural values that are expressed in oral discursive systems; it emphasizes a relational and experiential engagement with the world through sound-based forms of communication." The *graphic impulse* "expresses the cultural desire for the permanent recording of cultural knowledge in formats that will allow for recollection and study." The *critical impulse* is that which disrupts stagnant meanings, it "is always balancing but never creating a static balance. […] [I]t is precisely when things *seem* stable, *seem* natural, that they must be questioned […]. The critical impulse arises out of a context of community consciousness, and it responds to the oral and graphic communicative needs of a community for survival" (emphasis in the original).

[38] The poem "Deer Dancer" by Joy Harjo reflects the "(post)colonial" trauma of being Indigenous: "We were Indian ruins. […]/ This is the bar of broken survivors, the club of the shotgun, knife wound, of poison by culture" (*In Mad Love and War* 5). In Harjo's poem, the woman's dance on the bar tables resembles the trickster's way of breaking its way out of stagnant meanings; through her dance, Deer Woman—"[t]he woman inside the woman who was to dance naked in the bar of misfits blew deer magic" and, as she "became human," she redeems the Native to humanity, by imagining "the ancestors who never left" (Harjo, 5-6).

In other stories, such as "Dog Woman" or "Wives," the protagonists bear the scars of past violent or insidious abuse. The women—represented as "honest-to-God-witch" (in "Dog Woman") or "pierced with arrows of [...] microaggressions" (in "Wives," a story of a couple of Two-Spirit newlyweds) for their difference read as signs of "wild" womanhood—use Deer Woman's regenerative energy to comfort and protect other victims of daily cruelty, regardless of their race.

Conclusions

The Native works discussed here carry, in story or visual art, the meaning of Indigenous warriorship—recovering sovereignty. The contemporary versions of Deer Woman are warriors in the sense Taiaiake Alfred explains the concept of *Wasasé*—the original people's way of war—one for "the recognition and respect of […] one's place in Creation and awareness of one's place in a circle of integrity. Our [Native people's] goal […] means finding ways to restore the connections that define indigenous consciousness and ways of being" (Alfred, n.p.). While stereotype still informs representations of the Indigenous in non-Native cultural products, exposing the tension between "fixity" and "repeatability" (Bhabha 94-95) in the construction of the colonized, the Native works inspired by Deer Woman's tricksterism render her a figure of protest, empowerment, and recovery, and revise the Indigenous (as) text, subvert static meanings, and invent new significations.

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Critical Thinking, Reading Comprehension, and Social Justice: University Students' Knowledge of the Concept of Slavery

Abstract: In this paper, the authors start from the assumption that what is taught in secondary/high schools forms the basis of the general knowledge learners carry with them when they start their university studies. Discourse analysis of first-year university students' responses to a reading comprehension question (purposefully selected from a cohort of 500+ students taking a first-semester Academic Communication Skills course) shows how erroneous this hypothesis might be. In addition to this discourse analysis, we examined the secondary/high school curriculum (Ministry of Education and Training, Eswatini) in order to highlight the main elements of slavery taught in the schools. We investigate the notion of critical thinking—or lack thereof—in relation to some unexpected answers to an examination question relating to slavery. We highlight some of the possible reasons for the presence of a high number (76 responses out of 507) of surprising student responses and how a reading comprehension question has shed light on it.

Keywords: critical thinking, higher education, traditional and modern slavery, reading comprehension, social justice

Introduction

In modern education, critical thinking is a core competency that needs to be developed. When in a reading comprehension examination at a university on the African continent, due to a possible misunderstanding of the content of a reading passage and in response to a question about slavery, a large number of university students write that slaves were taken care of by their owners in the past, educators should be alarmed. Have the students been misinformed at high school; do they lack critical thinking skills or is the passage misleading?

This article examines and critiques the assumption that university students' schema on different subjects is always formed at school and is stable and permanent. Using the example of a group of students' interpretations of the concept of slavery, we discuss the value of helping students to develop and maintain the right schema—in this case knowing the meaning and types of slavery—to enhance their learning experience and to get one step closer to reaching social justice. And to reach this goal, we would argue that educators at any level should assist students to develop critical thinking skills so that they can combine both their learned and acquired knowledge to better interact with the world around them. Accordingly, after briefly reviewing the concepts of slavery and modern slavery and the place of critical thinking in teaching, learning and assessment in higher education institutions (HEI), we will introduce the context of the study, provide an analysis of the reading comprehension exam paper of a group of first-year students at the University of Eswatini and have an in-depth look at how their responses may have been formed.

Literature Review

The Concept of Slavery: Traditional and Modern

We will begin this section by briefly reviewing the concept of slavery, as it is relevant to the content of the exam that has informed our decision to conduct our small-scale study. To develop our arguments alongside the discussion of the definition of slavery and the importance of including social justice-related issues in education, we will then continue by reviewing the impact and significance of critical thinking and schema on effective reading comprehension in particular and education in general.

The term slavery is entangled with the concept of ownership. Slaves were owned by their slave-masters and owners and had to obey them. The popular understanding of the concept of a slave is Black Africans being brought to the US by force, chained and tortured. Reviewing the existing documents and autobiographies of some of the slaves who were brought to the US during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass (1845), *Roots, the Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley (1976), *12 years a slave* by Solomon Northup (2014) confirm these beliefs. In 1641 slavery was legalized in Massachusetts, USA. This meant that slaves could be sold as the property of their owners, and many lived in extremely difficult conditions. The American Civil War led to the official adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution on December 18, 1865—246 years after the first shipload of captive Africans landed at Jamestown (Virginia, USA) and were bought as enslaved workers (Bertocchi 2016).

Despite the condemnation of slavery in the traditional sense, modern slavery still exists (Landman & Silverman 2019). One piece of evidence is that the UN sustainable goal 8.7 emphasizes eradicating forced labor and modern slavery by 2030. Forty million people are estimated to be living as slaves in some form around the world (Nolan & Boersma 2019). Modern slavery takes many forms, including labor-, domestic servitude, sexual and criminal exploitation (O'Connell Davidson, 2013; Broad & Turnbull, 2019). According to the WalkFree Foundation, which fights for eradicating modern slavery, modern slavery “refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power” (n.p.).

The causes of modern-day slavery are varied and controversial. Inequalities, economic globalization, armed conflict, regional differentiation (Manzo 2005; Domar 2017) are believed to be among the leading causes. Taking action in any form is the main solution offered to end slavery and injustice to exploited people.

In our century, when the UN Sustainable Development Goals have been developed “to secure a sustainable, peaceful, prosperous and equitable life on earth, for everyone now and in the future” (United Nations 2015), university students, too, are expected to be well-informed about social justice issues. This includes the concept of slavery, both modern and traditional. This knowledge should enable them to better identify and address it as future employees, employers, and active members of their societies. For the students to become “active agents of change and social justice” (Hackman 2005, 105), providing content alone as a source of information is insufficient. The students need to be equipped with the ability to use critical analysis. Hackman gives the example of individuals in the US who have known about the manifestations of racism but have not managed to make changes on "the deepest of levels" (105). For this change to happen, students need to gain information from multiple sources, have open minds, analyze the effects of power and oppression, and look for alternatives. Since the eradication of slavery is one of the missions of social justice, modern classes from school to university should help clarify its definition and negative impacts. This is the main reason for providing the correct information and improving students’ ability to think critically. Comparing and contrasting the present with the past may shed light on today's situation and help citizens better determine what steps can be taken next to eradicate slavery

(Bravo 2007, 2011). This is one of the reasons that developing critical thinking is essential in modern education.

Higher Education Mission in the Twenty-first Century

In an article on the roles that US universities should play in promoting democracy, Harkavy (2006) argues that universities should focus on educating students to be responsible citizens who try to solve real-life problems both locally and globally. He proposes that universities should be involved in making "university-assisted community schools" that can eventually lead to establishing "democratic Good Societies in the twenty-first century" (34). This argument means that universities, too, should be ready and committed to addressing social justice at micro and macro levels. As Wade, Anderson Bean, and Teixeira-Poit (2019) put it, addressing social justice at universities is a vital part of university education and, "Achieving equity in society means addressing the root causes of the barriers that create and sustain inequalities. Although aspects of inclusion and inequality remain divisive and controversial, the truth is, having a social justice perspective is vital to classroom and campus success" (1).

Critical Thinking and Education

Critical thinking is a core competency to develop in modern education. It is usually included in the expected learning outcomes of university students across nations (Lloyd & Bahr 2010; Wardani et al. 2018; Erikson & Erikson 2019). Even though the definitions of critical thinking are slightly varied, terms such as reasoning, analyzing, synthesizing, interpreting, judging, and evaluating are commonly used when characterizing it (Lai, 2011; Moore 2013; Larsson 2017). For instance, Binkley et al. (2012) have categorized the twenty-first-century goals of learning into four main groups: ways of thinking, working, tools and working, and living in the world. They believe each category should be assessed based on the students' level of knowledge, skills, and attitudes/values/ethics (KSAVE). Learning to think systematically, having effective reasoning, and being able to articulate problems are among the requirements of this model and should be taught and assessed.

Moreover, the findings of a study conducted by APA, as Liu et al. (2014) report, are very similar to KSAVE. Interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference and explanation, and self-regulation are believed to be the cognitive dimensions of critical thinking. In short, critical thinking can lead to evaluating acquired information and applying it to better understand a situation or solve a problem and may lead to students better performing in their jobs after graduation.

Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking

Effective reading comprehension activities are among the many ways educators can assess students' ability to explore, analyze and make relevant judgments. Therefore, reading comprehension and critical thinking go hand in hand, as they both contribute to better understanding and reflection. If we agree that critical thinking is "a means to activate or construct schema" (Aloqaili 2011), then reading it can contribute to "filling in the missing connections between the surface structure fragments of the text by recourse to content and knowledge about the world" (35-36). Unfortunately, several studies conducted in recent years indicate that some university students with different backgrounds and living in different countries have difficulty understanding what they read (Bharuthram 2012; de-la-Peña & Luque-Rojas 2021). Lacking the competencies required for reading comprehension makes "coping with academic and personal situations challenging" (de-la-Peña & Luque-Rojas 2021, 1) and hinders the students' autonomy in education.

Educators can and should guide students in the process, as readers need to make the connection between what they read and their schemata. Responsive reading instruction and assessment of reading in post-modern education acknowledge the role of readers as active participants—their prior knowledge

and experiences matter (Toppel 2015). And as Guppy & Hughes (1999) put it, "reading involves not only 'reading the lines,' but also 'reading between the lines' and 'reading beyond the lines'" (1).

Identifying cognitive constructs is an essential step in processing information while reading. However, along with the gained knowledge from the reading material, each person's socio-cultural perspectives are essential to better understanding the message (McVee et al. 2005). Therefore, readers' prior experience, interactions with the world, and interpretation of the message are vital to comprehending what has been read and how the retrieved information is used.

The schema that our students were expected to have was about slavery, and they needed to critically evaluate it and compare it to the world as they know it. They needed to read a passage on modern slavery and then think critically, read between the lines, and use the information to better analyze slavery and its place in history and the world around them. Many could successfully do that; however, as this paper will show, some could not. The current study is an example of how we, as educators, should carefully examine the findings that emerge from a reading comprehension examination and use those to better guide our teaching and our students.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism and social constructivism, being among the main trends of modern education, encourage teachers to assist their students in observing, interacting, and reflecting to make changes in their lives and societies. Teachers are supposed to be the external scaffold and learners, through reflection and self-monitoring, are the internal scaffolding (Kaufman 2004) and, therefore, are not passive recipients of knowledge. Building the students' cognitive potential is important. University students in post-modern classes construct their identities on an ongoing basis (Kumaravadivelu 2012). In any educational environment built on theories of social constructivism, equipping students to think critically to lead them towards making inferences relevant to their context is critical. In Paulo Freire's words (1972), "liberating education consists of acts of cognition, not transferrals of information" (60). The current study is built on the assumption that realities may have different interpretations (Cohen et al. 2007) and that people construct their world based on their schemata and situations (Pring 2000). Through quality education, students can be guided to make the right judgments and inferences, and this is particularly important to help achieve social justice and have better life qualities. Moreover, as Harkvay (2006) has put it, to have a democratic society, universities should educate knowledgeable and responsible citizens; therefore, their education matters.

Methodology and Study Context

Context

Eswatini is a small country with a relatively large number of university students. In the Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Eswatini alone, 535 first-year students had registered for the Academic Communications Skills (ACS) module in the 2020-2021 academic year. The course content is similar to the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) modules, with academic reading and writing being the main topics to cover. In the year 2020-2021, like most classes around the world, teaching and learning were mainly done online; however, students had a paper-based final ACS examination on campus.

In the 2020-2021 academic year, one section of the final examination of the Academic Communication Skills (ACS) module was devoted to reading comprehension. The passage had been extracted from the *Guardian Unlimited* (May 12, 1999) and was adapted from *Disposable People* written by K. Bales (1990). It was about modern slavery. It provided examples of how people are misguided and earn little but provide high profits for their so-called employers. A part of the passage is how a grandmother had been misled

and coaxed into sending her granddaughter to take care of some children in a wealthy family, convinced that she would have a better future. The promises had not been kept at all, and the girl had been mistreated. Within the passage, the writer commented on this story and contrasted it with the traditional meaning of a slave, saying,

> The average slave in Mississippi in 1850 cost about $60,000 in today's money, and profits fluctuated around the 5% mark. The slave was an asset to be looked after and bred, an investment that could generate years of labor. This meant a long-term relationship and a certain level of care. Today, a slave is not worth keeping longer than is absolutely necessary.

Among the reading comprehension questions and in the hope that some higher-order thinking would also be assessed, the students were asked the following question: "The author uses the word 'slaves' throughout the passage. Explain the difference between the traditional meaning of the word slave with how it is used in the passage." In this case, the assumption was that the students' background knowledge would contribute to their ability to answer the question.

One of the expected answers was that in the past, the majority of the slaves were Black; however, now, they could be of different races and ethnicities. Another assumed answer was that slavery in the past was forced on people; however, as this particular passage also suggests, modern slaves might voluntarily and, due to certain hardships in life, choose to be exploited financially or might be misinformed about where they are going and for what purpose. Many are not kidnapped. They might initially assume that they would be receiving some benefits that they did not have when they agreed to be exploited, or the situation they were in was so intolerable that they preferred to escape no matter what the new circumstances would be. Several students, though, had very different responses. They had taken a sentence out of the passage without considering the whole text and provided that as the answer to the question.

Research Design and Sampling Method

Our research was qualitative and exploratory. We chose purposive sampling, taking the participants whose responses were 'surprising' as our study group. Those responses that were very different from the expected answers to the question in mind were deliberately selected to provide the information that would emerge only from them (Maxwell 2012).

Research Questions

The 'surprising' responses given by the 76 study participants inspired us to take a closer look at our students' interpretation of the concept of slavery and review our students' ability to read and think critically.

Accordingly, the following questions emerged:

Q 1: Which student answers are different from the ones expected by those setting the examination questions?

Q 2: How should teachers ensure a better understanding of the concept of slavery as one representation of other social justice issues?

Participants

Out of 535 students registered in the classes, 507 first-year students from the Faculty of Agriculture took part in the end-of-year written examination. In one of the questions, they were asked to compare modern and traditional slavery inspired by the passage they had read. Seventy-six gave answers that we found rather unexpected.

Procedure

All examination scripts were read. The scripts with 'surprising' answers were set aside. These were then read a second time to identify how different they were from the 'expected' answers. Discourse analysis was used to identify different themes, as discussed in the findings section of this paper.

Data Collection Instruments

The participants' examination scripts were our primary research documents.

Data Analysis and Findings

As mentioned earlier, studying the students' answers to the final reading comprehension questions suggested that some of the students' responses to the question on comparing traditional and modern slavery were unexpected. As expected, the analysis of the papers led to two main themes (students' understanding of traditional and modern slavery), and each theme had several sub-themes.

The Students' Thoughts on Traditional Slavery

Several themes on traditional slavery emerged from studying the sample papers. One of the most prevalent assumptions the students had was that slaves were taken care of by their owners in the past. For example, student A wrote:

> "The people (i.e., slaves) were taken care of. They were bred and looked after in the past."

Some students, including students E and F, thought that slaves were paid salaries, and some even believed that slaves were satisfied. Student E wrote:

> "Traditionally a slave is someone who has to work to serve another person willingly under comfortable conditions."

And according to student F:

> "Slaves were given food, shelter, and clothing in return for their work."

Some other students argued that slaves were legally owned and/or were investments for their owners. Students C, for example, said that,

> "Slavery is an inhumane and terrible practice in the modern world, while in the past, it was an investment for the slave owner."

And similarly, student D explained that,

> "Traditionally, slaves were bought at a reasonable price as an investment, and both slave and slave owner had responsibilities towards each other."

And student C went as far as saying that the slave master legally owned the slave.

These students seemed to have accepted that owning slaves was the right given to slave masters, and they did not think that owning a human being was an issue of concern. Some had milder opinions looking at slave owners as the employers of the slaves.

> Student F: "Traditionally, a slave is a person who is hired to do certain jobs like cleaning and gardening."

One said that they were given low salaries for their work.

Another thought that emerged from the exam papers was that slaves were criminals and being a slave was a part of their punishment, or they had been defeated in a war.

***Table 1**: the most common unexpected answers that the population under study provided regarding their understanding of traditional slavery.*

The most common unexpected responses about traditional slavery	**Number of students**
In the past slaves had a good life or a better life compared to modern slaves. Slaves were taken care of in the past	24
Slaves earned money, but not a lot. They were well fed. They had good shelter.	8
Slaves were legally owned.	6
Slave owners had a higher status than the slaves. Slave owners got slaves because of their wrongdoing. The crimes of the slaves were the reason some people were slaves. Slaves were taken during wars.	5

As **Table 1** also illustrates, the most common answer was that slaves were taken care of in the past as they would, later, be sold. Some thought that they were legally owned and that their owners had a high status, or that slaves were criminals and being a slave was their punishment, or they had been abducted during wars. In summary, and as can be inferred from the sample responses, these students did not necessarily think that traditional slavery was something to despise or at least frown upon.

Students' Thoughts on Modern Slavery

In the 76 papers of the students whose exams we have studied, the main argument is that in modern times an enslaved person is anyone who is mistreated, and from the tone of many of the responses to the question, it can be inferred that they think that rich people are the root of the problem. Student F said:

> "Most kids who are being vulnerable become slaves, being promised better lives by those who are rich."

Student D also has the same opinion and says:

"We work hard and earn very little, so we are always dependent financially. This is slavery."

Some students think modern slavery is equal to parents and relatives exploiting their children. One student argues that only people living in rural areas are enslaved, and another believes that modern slaves help out with the household and are not paid.

Overall, many of the interpretations and explanations of the sample group lacked depth or were incomplete. It seemed that some of the responses, such as the ones about parents or rich people, might have been articulated out of anger or frustration.

***Table 2**: The most common unexpected answers about modern slavery*

The most common responses about modern slavery	**Number of students**
Modern slavery means being treated unfairly by the wealthy/ being exploited by the rich.	12
Parents and relatives turn their children into slaves by abusing them or not letting them have education.	10
Being paid minimum wage or low salaries despite working hard is what modern slavery is.	10

The most common words used by almost all the respondents in defining modern slavery were 'exploitation' and 'being taken advantage of.' On the other hand, the most common words used to describe the slaves are 'being poor' and 'vulnerable.' Many are under the impression that anybody who is poor and works for a more affluent person is being exploited and a slave.

Altogether, 76 papers out of 507 suggest that almost one out of six students studying ACS had a misunderstanding or an incomplete view of slavery.

Discussion

The current study suggests that many first-year university students at the University of Eswatini had a very different understanding of modern and traditional slavery concepts compared to what was expected. This difference was revealed after the students sat a reading comprehension exam and answered a question regarding what they assumed to be the difference between the two groups. In this section, first, we look at the content of the school lessons regarding the topic of slavery. This allows us to provide tentative answers as to why the knowledge we expected the first-year university students to have is not that common. Then, our discussion goes into two different directions: our interpretation of why the students answered the way they did and how important it is for social justice to be addressed even at higher education institutions. Throughout this section, we also discuss how our findings compare with the available literature.

Content and Importance of School Lessons

Many students who start university studies have taken History as one of their subjects in high school. While at the level of the Junior Certificate (Forms 1 to 3), the focus is on the history of Southern Africa and Eswatini, the curriculum of the later years (Forms 4 and 5) concentrates on twentieth-century world history (History Syllabus, Eswatini General Certificate of Secondary Education, Examinations Council of

Eswatini, 2020). In the second topic of that particular History program, the League of Nations is analyzed from various angles, namely the aims, organization, membership, and powers of the League, the League in action in the 1920s, the impact of the Depression on international relations, the League in action in the 1930s, the League and disarmament, and the last subtopic—of particular interest to our paper—the work of the League on refugees, health, drugs, and slavery. With this last subtopic on the History teaching and learning agenda, it can be expected that youngsters having gone through the curriculum have a basic understanding of the meaning and content of slavery. The examiners at the university had assumed that if the students had studied the topic at school, they would have some sound knowledge about it. They had also assumed that school is the place that nurtures students' critical thinking and knowledge of the world, and the university would build upon those skills and knowledge. The school in Eswatini had developed this knowledge for many but had failed some. Other countries, such as Australia, also emphasize the role of schools in educating pupils from a very young age to be better citizens in the future. According to Harrison and Greenfield (2011, 65), teachers at primary schools in Australia are required to "embed aboriginal perspectives" into their daily lessons. Indigenous people are active members of Australian society, and their knowledge and insight matter. What Harrison and Greenfield's study identified was that many teachers lacked the confidence to teach those perspectives on a daily basis. To solve the problem, many of the principals require the teachers to receive some additional training and encourage them to work closely with indigenous parents, which again demonstrates that the effective practice of a cultural issue needs a good curriculum and well-trained teachers.

Another study that highlighted the importance of effective schools was conducted in South Africa in 2001. When the study was conducted, Black schools, especially, in South Africa, needed a new culture of learning and teaching to encourage the students to stay at school and take their education more seriously. Among the aims of this culture was promoting creative and critical thinking and fostering "attitudes and values that are compatible with the ongoing transformation of society" (Lethoko et al. 2001, 311).

Both of the above studies highlight the importance given to school education. Regarding the fact that knowing about social justice issues in any form can help shape the thoughts and actions of the students, the success of schools in promoting this understanding is essential. As discussed earlier, Harkvay (2006) believes that modern American universities need to promote citizenship and social justice to pave the way for a democratic society. We believe his thoughts apply to all educational institutions around the world. He argues that the university-community-school partnership is vital in reaching the goal. His experience suggests that schools and universities should work closely to prepare the curriculum, research, and complement each other's work.

Based on the responses of our students to the question on the meaning of slavery, and studying some similar studies, we are now convinced that Harkvay's proposed model will work very well in our context as well, and the basis of this social justice-related knowledge should have been the content of school lessons. The twenty-first-century universities working closely with the schools and the community can make reaching the goals of modern education less challenging.

At the same time, at universities, we are also responsible for building upon the students' background knowledge and creating new knowledge. As Shulman (2003) suggests, the goal of the university should be to promote "knowledge" and "wisdom."

Reasons for Unexpected Answers

A closer look at the responses suggests there may be different reasons for these 'unexpected answers.' One interpretation, as discussed above, can be that the students lacked the proper schema. Furthermore, an assumption for this lack of prior knowledge can be that they had been misinformed at school. This interpretation can be rather suspicious given the past experiences of many African continent countries,

and if it is the case, it gives some room for concern. Besides, exploring the content of the school material suggests that very little was shared at the high school level (and nothing before that) on the exact meaning and impact of slavery. This is also something to think about.

In the case of our students' responses to the question regarding slavery, the assumption was that the students' schema and their background knowledge would help them answer the question; however, the responses of a few suggested otherwise. Nevertheless, learning the students' schema and guiding them to think critically about the environment around them can help students reach the wisdom expected from them. Moreover, learning about their schema can be as easy as paying attention to the students' responses to a reading comprehension question.

Another simple interpretation can be that the test question had not been formed in a way that would make students reflect. More than 400 students were able to provide reasonable or what, according to their teachers, were expected answers to the question; therefore, it is unlikely that the question had been designed poorly. The question had, of course, been designed based on the assumption that the students had the proper background knowledge. If they did not, this could have been one of the roots of the problem.

The way the same students answered the question could also be a sign that they did not think critically and were only answering the question without in-depth looking at the text or reflecting on their own knowledge and even common sense. This reason, we believe, is the most likely of all and suggests that our teaching method should be revised to encourage the students to value thinking critically. Even if we assume that some of our students had not developed the schema at school, we still expected them to be able to read between the lines. When the passage mentioned that the enslaved person was an investment for the enslaver, this did not mean that the enslaved person was taken care of. The fact that a human being was owned by another should be enough to illustrate the injustice.

At the same time, comparing what our small study has led us to believe with McVee et al. (2005) perspective of schema, and the importance of teachers' paying attention to culture and sociocultural interactions in inferring the meaning of the reading texts, becomes even more perceptible. They wrote:

> If we think of a schema as embodied and not just in the head, it becomes clear that patterns of enactment and ways of engaging the world shape our interpretation of cultural activity and are shaped by cultural activity. This requires very different ways of thinking about teaching and learning. Not only must teachers scaffold and model for students, but they must also be cognizant of the role of schemas as embodied social and cultural constructs that mediate students' learning. (550)

One might also argue that the students had simply been careless and had not given their answers enough thought. Provided that this is the case, then we as their educators need to revisit our teaching. Social justice is not a topic to be taken lightly. Therefore, we need to highlight its importance in our classes. The necessity of including social justice issues in education (Wade et al. 2019) and language teaching has been highlighted more than ever in recent years; therefore, discussing issues such as slavery, and assisting students to understand the delicacy and criticality of the situation some people are in, is essential.

All in all, it is not yet possible to definitely state what the reasons were behind the students' answers. What clearly, and most surprisingly, appears from their responses is that those competencies and skills educators expect from university students—basic knowledge on important topics such as slavery and basic critical thinking skills—are not necessarily in place for all. In this particular case, the definition of slavery is blurred for one in every six of the students whose papers we checked. They either have an incomplete understanding of the concept of slavery, thinking, for example, that being paid minimum wage is equal to slavery, or some assume that only the wealthy treat people like slaves or that parents enslave their children by mistreating them. Moreover, many of our students seem to think that some people's experiences

(modern slaves) are far more devastating than what the traditional enslaved people experienced. The reasons they think the way they do may also be worth studying.

All in all, relatively few studies have touched upon using reading comprehension questions to better understand the students' thoughts and pave the way for gaining a better insight into the students' thoughts. The ideas articulated here are in harmony with the findings of some other studies that indicate that reading comprehension is necessary for student success in education and life, and it can be achieved by promoting critical thinking. "Every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well" (Anderson, 1977, 369).

Conclusions

In this paper, we intended to explore the possible reasons for a series of highly unexpected answers observed in a first-year university examination. The Academic Communication Skills end-of-year examination paper required students to use their critical thinking skills in a reading comprehension task. The text discussed the concept of slavery and its contemporary interpretation. Some students interpreted traditional slavery as something entirely positive (enslaved people worked willingly for an enslaver, benefitted from that, and were taken care of) and were unable to adequately compare modern-day slavery to the inhumane treatment traditional slavery first and foremost was. As educators, we need to pay attention to such 'misinterpretations' and find ways to enhance students' critical thinking skills. This must be one of our priorities if we want to turn our learners into twenty-first-century citizens who work towards eradicating social injustices worldwide. Reading comprehension activities can contribute to reaching this aim.

Limitations to the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

Since the exam was taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, gaining access to at least some of the students whose papers we looked at and seeking the reasons for their answers immediately after the exam was not possible.

Additional research should be undertaken on the alignment between reading activities and important cultural, historical, and societal topics. It is essential to ascertain students' prior knowledge, skills, and attitudes before setting formative and summative assessment activities.

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Subversive Hybridity and Mimicry in the Visual Representations and Philosophy of Vietnamese Cao Đàism

Abstract: Robert J. C. Young, in his work *Postcolonialism, A Historical Introduction*, points out that postcolonial studies are often distinguished by unmediated secularism and thus end up excluding the religions that have attempted to provide alternative value-systems to those of the West (338). Janet Hoskins, an anthropologist at the University of Southern California and one of the West's foremost experts on Cao Đàism, also noticed how religion is overlooked by postcolonial theory ("Posthumous Return" 218). At the same time, Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* also pointed out that postcolonial theory does not value subaltern resistance that operates according to its secular terms (85). Within the context of these observations, we aim to argue that the specific ways the Cao Đài adopted, adapted, and ultimately symbolically subverted the colonial discourse are very relevant to postcolonial theory. It is thus within the scope of the paper to analyze some of their symbols, visual representations, and elements of their philosophy that were adapted into new forms within the processes of cultural hybridization and mimicry coined by Homi Bhabha in his seminal work, *The Location of Culture*.

Keywords: Vietnam, Cao Đài, Hybridity, Mimicry, Homi Bhabha, Postcolonialism, Religion, Marxism

Introduction

As stated within the abstract, the paper's aim is twofold. On the one hand, we have in mind the observations made by Robert Young, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Janet Hoskins, so I will try to avoid the unmediated secularism mentioned and discuss a different type of subaltern resistance to colonialism. This approach would have the effect to further postcolonial discourse into areas previously not given sufficient attention. Many publications specializing in postcolonial theory do not focus on spiritual movements toomuch as a category for analyzing anti-colonial resistance processes of hybridization. This can be exclusionary towards indigenous spiritual movements such as the Cao Đài and their millions of followers whose particular ways of opposing colonialism have not yet been wholly recognized, understood, and examined by postcolonial theory. The irony is that this tendency can beseen as being tributary to colonial ideology itself. Robert Young argues, when discussing the French colonial system, that it was the most secular and progressive of all imperial ideologies to the point of assuming (in discourse) the fundamental equality of all human beings and that the French believed that however "backward" the colonized people were, all could benefit from the imposition of French culture (44). The negative side of this narrative was that the French colonial model did not have the slightest respect and sympathy for the indigenous culture, language, and institutions of the people being colonized (Young 44).

Conversely, postcolonial theory often centers on analyzing anti-colonial movements rooted in secular ideas that may be familiar to Europeans while giving less attention to non-secular forms of anti-colonial resistance. By doing this, we are continuing the cycle of privileging and focusing mainly on western modes of subverting the colonial discourse to the detriment of certain indigenous non-western forms of resistance. In the particular case of the Cao Đài, the cultural hybridization that Homi Bhabha discusses

happened on a spiritual level. They adopted and adapted aspects of the colonial discourse and then, later on, used them to subvert the discourse of the colonizers. Cao Đài's strategies of resistance to the French empire were thus different from those employed by the Indochinese Communist Party, for example. The ICP's anti-colonial resistance can easily be discussed/explained from a Marxist perspective. It is not so in the case of the Cao Đài, who rejected secular materialism from the get-go and found both the French colonial ideology of the "mission civilisatrice" and the secular materialist philosophy of the ICP as being imported from the West. They understood that within the context of the Indochinese Wars and later on the Vietnam War/Cold War, Vietnam was caught in the middle of a struggle between two ideological constructs/narratives, both of European origin. Despite all of this, they culturally appropriated and synthesized aspects from both colonial and Marxist discourse, harmonizing them within the context of Vietnam's indigenous spiritual doctrines. Thus, cultural hybridization and mimicry processes that occurred in this particular context were unique. A discussion of theirrepresentations, architectural style, clothing, and philosophy is relevant to understanding how they symbolically subverted the colonial discourse.

Homi Bhabha's Theory

Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture* is a crucial text for postcolonial studies that discusses the complex interactions between colonizers and the colonized. In his view, the colonized may adopt and mimic particular aspects of the colonizer's culture and thus create new forms of culture. He quotes Goethe's suggestion that the possibility of world literature arises from the cultural confusion wrought by terrible wars and mutual conflicts and that those nations could not return to their initial ways of being without learning foreign ideas and ways they adopted. Previously unrecognized needs emerge from the imposition of foreign ideas, cultural representations, and power structures (Bhabha 11). This fact is not meant to be an excuse for the crimes of colonialism but is instead necessary for understanding the cultural processes taking place in such a context. The mimicry that Bhabha refers to can have both negative and positive effects. Negative in the sense that on the one hand, the colonial subject loses to some degree contact with "their" own culture, but positive in the sense that the mimicking can also subvert the system of the colonizer:

> [Hibridity] displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. (112)
>
> The hybrid object, on the other hand, retains the actual semblance of the authoritative symbol but revalues its presence by resisting it as the signifier of Einstellung—after the intervention of difference. It is the power of this strange metonymy of presence to so disturb the systematic (and systemic) construction of discriminatory knowledges that the cultural, once recognized as the medium of authority becomes virtually unrecognizable. (115)

The states of Indochina—Tonkin in North Vietnam, Annam in central Vietnam, Cochinchina in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos—have been French colonies or protectorates starting from the middle of the nineteenth century (Windrow 3), while South Vietnam remained under western influence until the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 (Hillstrom xi). At the time, many forces opposed colonial rule in the country. Most of us are familiar with the communists who fought during the Indochina Wars against France or the USA. However, they were not the only ones. Janet Hoskins contrasts the communists with the Cao Dai, who were not influenced to such a degree by Marxism. The Cao Dai leaders studied in

Vietnamese schools rather than in French schools (where many Indochinese communist leaders studied and picked up on communist ideas). Janet Hoskins argues that because of this, Cao Dai leaders preferred to reconcile Asian philosophical tradition with European modernity rather than adopt another foreign ideology ("Syncretism" 53). It is in this climate that the Cao Đài religion was born, and it is here where we need to discuss the concept of hybridity.

The Cao Đài is one of the world's relatively new religious movements. The name of the movement is Đại Đạo Tam Kz Phổ Độ ("The Great Faith for the Third Universal Redemption"). What makes this faith unique is, on the one hand, the colonial context in which it emerged in 1926 and, on the other hand, its manifest ambitious religious project of unifying all the world's religions into one universal religion. I would also argue that in the particular case of Vietnam, we can discuss hybridity in the plural as there was not a single hybridization process but multiple overlapping ones. Before the Europeans arrived in the area, the country had periods in which it was under the domination of the Chinese empire.

Moreover, similarly to the westerners that brought Christian culture to the area and forced it on the population, the Chinese brought Confucianism and sought to instill those values in the natives (and encountered similar fierce resistance from them) (Miyakawa 31). However, by the time Europeans arrived, Confucianism was established and coexisted along with Buddhism and Taoism in the area, forming the community of the three faiths or "tam giáo" (Tran 133). When one travels to Southeast Asia, one would be surprised to see followers who frequent temples or places of worship that belong to various faiths or philosophies simultaneously. One could be a Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucianist simultaneously in various degrees, with some individuals leaning more to the Buddhist aspect, or the Taoist, or the Confucianist one. Thus, when discussing hybridity in an East Asian or Southeast Asian context, we need to understand that from the very beginning, even before the European colonizers arrived, the local culture had already undergone processes of hybridization. Therefore, as Homi Bhabha argues, the claims to culture's innate originality or purity are invalid.

The Subversive Hybridity

Figure 1: Cao Đài painting of sages on a Dragon Boat with the Divine Eye watching from above (Photo: Personal Archive)

In the image above, we can observe a piece of East Asian art in which some classic symbols are employed. Eberhard argues that in Asian culture, clouds, for example, are symbols of celestial mobility because many gods and immortals are imagined as using clouds to travel. Scrolling clouds predict the arrival of divinities. In our case, divinities are portrayed as arriving in a Dragon Boat circled by cranes. The crane is an East Asian symbol of longevity, wisdom, peace, noble character, and loyalty (Eberhard 86), and many people in this region still believe that a crane carries a deceased person's soul to the afterlife. The circling of cranes above associates these characteristics with the boat's occupants.

However, upon a closer inspection of our noble and peaceful traveling companions, we find Confucius, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Jesus of Nazareth because, as mentioned before, the goal of Cao Đài is uniting different spiritual traditions into a universal one. Above, the Divine Left Eye of God is watching the scene. In Cao Đài's worldview, all of them are children of the Jade Emperor (Duc Cao Đài), and thus, literally, sons of God. However, we should not confound this representation of the Divine Eye with those employed in the West, like the one found on the dollar bill or the one used by Freemasons. In fact, the Cao Đài leaders make a clear distinction between the two, as Do Van Ly points out:

> The Vietnamese and the Americans are the two peoples who worship under the sign of the eye. We have it in our temples, you have it on a sacred object in your society—the dollar bill. Yours is the right eye. Ours is the left eye. The left eye is closer to the heart. It is connected to morality, tradition and ethics. The right eye is closer to the brain. It is connected to technology, industry and development. America has given the idea of democracy to the world, but they have lost the ethical dimension. One day there will be a people that will develop that ideal of democracy and bring it back to the world with its original ethics. These people will be the Vietnamese. (Ly qtd. in Hoskins, "Diaspora" 73)

So we see how their representation of the Divine Eye directly opposes the materialist worldview associated with western civilization, especially in its most visible manifestation at the time: colonialism. The Divine Eye employed by the Cao Dai is re-semantized as an anti-colonial symbol. As Janet Hoskins argues, looking at God through the left eye reclaims the positive righteous perspective of Asian wisdom over the limited right-eyed perspective of colonialism ("Syncretism" 51). When the Cao Đài employ a symbol similar to the one westerners use and place it at the core of their symbolic depictions, with the complete opposite symbolic valence, we can speak of symbolic hybridization, one that is particularly subversive since it represents a rejection of western materialist values associated with colonial exploitation. As to where we can observe representations of this anti-colonial symbol in Cao Đài theology, the answer is: 'everywhere'—in their temples, their artwork, on priestly clothes, flags, and holy books. The Cao Đài logo carries an explicit anti-colonial message on behalf of the exploited natives. The Cao Dai flag includes the Divine Eye and the yellow alms bowl symbolizing Mahayana Buddhism, a blue feather duster symbolizing Taoism, and a Red book symbolizing Confucianism. These are the three major faiths in the area united under one banner.

In one of my interviews with Reverend Tran Canh, the Cao Đài missionary leader in Green Grove, California, he revealed to me that the Cao Đài did not initially start as an anti-colonial movement. However, it quickly became one when the French arrested the Cao Đài leader, Ho Phap Pham Cong Tac, whom they exiled and imprisoned in Madagascar. One of the reasons he was exiled was the French fear explicitly manifested, namely that: "This person threatens to be another Gandhi" (Hoskins, "A Posthumous Return" 217).

After the event, the French colonial government closed all Cao Đà temples, invaded the Tay Ninh Holy See, and turned it into a garage for parking vehicles. Only after this event took place did the members of the faith start to espouse more direct anti-colonial ideas. The French comparison with Gandhi is very well-founded as well. In his work, Robert Young notices how Gandhi's thinking was

inherently anti-systematic and operated as a kind of radical cultural eclecticism. Although he opposed western modernity, he was influenced by specific western ideas combined with aspects from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism, and even Islam. The result was an anti-systematic syncretism that broke down the institutional reification of individual religions (Young 372). This aspect is highly similar to how the Cao Đài shaped their own brand of anti-colonial resistance in a particular Southeast Asian context.

The particular ways Cao Đài integrated Christian elements and how they used those elements to subvert colonial rule further confirms the importance of Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry. After the exile of the Cao Đài leader, we know many followers did not focus on the same aspects of Jesus' life that the colonialists did but instead gave him a revolutionary bent.

Was not Jesus also an "oriental" colonial subject living in a land under the domination of a European empire based in Rome? Was not Jesus detained for rebelling against colonial rule and vied for a form of independence outside imperial dominion when he proclaimed himself "The King of the Jews"? (Hoskins, "Posthumous" 51).

Thus, while the French attempted to use the image of Jesus in their "civilizing mission" to convert the natives to European Christianity, the Cao Đài converted Jesus himself to a Vietnamese freedom fighter for independence from colonial oppression based on information found in the very same holy book the French insisted on being present in all schools throughout Vietnam. This approach is particularly genius because now the colonizer disseminates a book interpreted by the colonized as incorporating an anti-colonial narrative. The Cao Đài focused on an alternative interpretation of the figure of Jesus. Moreover, Jesus Christ was not the only historical figure to receive such treatment. Another famous one would be Jeanne D'Arc. They used her image as a French hero that fought to expel foreign invaders from France. Jean Jacques Rousseau is also regarded by Janet Hoskins as one of the faith's "spiritual advisers" ("Jesus, Lenin and Victor Hugo" n.p.) for the Cao Đài also pointed out that the French ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity were great ideas in themselves; the only problem is that they applied only to the metropolis, not the colonies on the periphery. Thus, we see how the colonized adopted but most importantly adapted in their worldview aspects of the colonizer's culture with the explicit aim to subvert the colonial discourse. Images of Jesus Christ thus made their appearance in temples belonging to the faith alongside other Asian sages.

Figure 2: The Cao Dai Pantheon Bas-Relief
(Photo: Personal Archive)

Within the ceramic bas-relief depicted in **Figure 2**, we can observe, from left to right: Kuan Yin (the Goddess of Mercy), Lao Tzu, Buddha Sakyamuni, Confucius, Guan Yu (the God of War) while vertically moving downwards starting with the Buddha we have Li Bai (the God of Poetry), Jesus Christ and Jiang Ziya (a Chinese noble who helped the local king to overthrow the Shang Dynasty in ancient China). When interpreting the bas-relief, we should avoid making the mistake of interpreting Jesus Christ's somewhat central positioning within the bas-relief as equating with the equal importance of Jesus within this faith. The most important is the Buddha, as he is depicted higher than the other sages, with the next level of importance being Lao Tzu and Confucius. On a lower level still, we have the Goddess of Mercy and the God of War. After all of these, we find Jesus who would be higher in status only to Jiang Ziya. Finally, as we see, Jesus is represented in traditional Roman Catholic fashion with his hand pointing towards the heart known as Sacratissimum Cor Iesu (Most Sacred Heart of Jesus), seen by the Catholics as a symbol of God's love for humanity. Jeremy Jammes interprets the process through which Jesus Christ is appropriated within the Cao Dai pantheon as "Vietnamization" (205), which is also a form of hybridization if we have in mind Bhabha's *Location of Culture*.

Figure 3: The Tay Ninh Mural representing the three saints of Cao Dai
(Photo: Personal Archive)

The mural in **Figure 3** is to be found within the Tay Ninh Holy See in Vietnam. It depicts the Romantic novelist and writer Victor Hugo alongside Sun Yat-Sen and the Vietnamese poet and prophet Nguyen Binh Khiem. The noble idea of a symbolic unity between cultures, bound by common respect of love and justice principles, is the ideal to which Cao Đài followers must aspire.

The Cao Đài worship Victor Hugo as a saint, and their leader is believed to have communicated with the writer in a spiritist séance. However, why did this occur? How did a Romantic novelist become a saint? More importantly to our discussion, how is his image subversive to the colonial discourse? First of all, the author opposed Napoleon III and the conquest of Indochina, for which he was himself exiled from France. Secondly, he was by far the most widely read author in Indochina at the time. As Victor Hugo writes in *Les Misérables*:

> So long as there shall exist, by virtue of law and custom, decrees of damnation pronounced by society, artificially creating hells amid the civilization of earth, and adding the element of human fate to divine destiny; so long as the three great problems of the century—the degradation of man through pauperism, the corruption of woman through hunger, the crippling of children through lack of light—are unsolved; so long as social asphyxia is possible in any part of the world;—in other words, and with a still wider significance, so long as ignorance and poverty exist on earth, books of the nature of *Les Misérables* cannot fail to be of use. (n.p) [39]

> I don't know whether it will be read by everyone, but it is meant for everyone. It addresses England as well as Spain, Italy as well as France, Germany as well as Ireland, the republics that harbour slaves as well as empires that have serfs. Social problems go beyond frontiers. Humankind's wounds, those huge sores that litter the world, do not stop at the blue and red lines drawn on maps. Wherever men go in ignorance or despair, wherever women sell themselves for bread, wherever children lack a book to learn from or a warm hearth, *Les Miserables* knocks at the door and says, "Open up, I am here for you." (n.p.) [40]

Hugo was probably not aware, but his novel and message reached far beyond Western Europe. It is impossible to overestimate the impact such ideas and words had in colonial Indochina, where they were rightfully interpreted as a criticism of empire building. In her *Theory of Adaptation,* Linda Hutcheon mentions that adaptations can lead to hybrid works (151). In our case, we have the image and ideas of a French author. Such hybridization did not occur only in painting the mural but also in literature. Tess Do shows how the work *Les Misérables*, besides the tens of thousands of copies sold, was also indigenized through rewriting. She gives the example of the Vietnamese author Hồ-Biểu-Chánh who rewrote the novel by transposing it into a Vietnamese context with Vietnamese characters/themes under the title *Ngọn Cỏ Gio Đua* (*Blades of Grass in the Wind*). In this rewritten novel, Catholic love exemplified by Father Myriel is replaced by the Buddhist virtues of compassion, tolerance, and opposition to the three vices (Greed, Anger, Ignorance) exemplified in the Monk Chánh-Tâm. The advocacy for the republican ideal and anti-royalist revolution embodied by Colonel Pontmercy is turned into the character of Vương-Thể-Hùng, who incorporates the ideals of the hero figure who possesses moral righteousness and is a defender of the weak. Jean Valjean becomes Lê-Văn-Đó, a character who, like his French counterpart, also exemplifies the opposition to injustice and oppression (Do 20).

In politics, the novel also exercised influence in Vietnam as Peter Zinoman quotes Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Nguyễn-Văn-Linh, who argued that *Les Misérables* was the book that pointed him towards communism, rather than Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (21).

Finally, Hugo was a known practitioner of spiritism and a reader of Vietnamese poetry, which further boosted his popularity in a country where spiritist religions abound and thus was seen as revealing the intersection of Eastern and Western traditions (Hoskins, "The Divine Eye" 83). He was also a vegetarian, and in 1835, Hugo was told in a séance that he would be "resurrected" in the twentieth century as part of a new universal religion that unites Asian spirituality with western technological power (Chambers 25).

What attracted the Cao Đài to Hugo was precisely his anti-colonial stance. The Vietnamese found a western figure that supported their cause, and he is thus seen as a foreign ambassador to the faith. The image depicts what the Cao Đài call "The Third Alliance between God and Man," the birth of the religion that would unite the message of all earlier faiths and cultures, placing them on an equal footing, mutually respectful of each other, in a framework that in the twenty-first century we would call multicultural. It is

[39] https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/lesmis/full-text/preface/

[40] https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7715840-i-don-t-know-whether-it-will-be-read-by-everyone

worth noting that the Vietnamese imagined such a multicultural framework 100 years before we made efforts in Europe to work towards similar inclusive ideals. What they achieved in this process was devising the blueprint for a multicultural society before Europeans considered similar ideas worthwhile (after experiencing two World Wars).

Unfortunately, the day-to-day reality of colonial Indochina was much different from the mural's ideal. However, that was precisely the point of the representation. The ideal image rendering high aspirations was inevitably contrasted with the reality everyone was aware of: the natives were exploited and forced to work on colonial rubber plantations, being denied fundamental rights in their land by an oppressive colonial regime. The mural did not hide reality; it highlighted it through contrast precisely because the French regime was falling short of any high ideals, exposing the "civilizing mission" as an excuse for the material exploitation of the indigenous people. The representation also allowed the Cao Đài to occupy the moral high ground vis-a-vis the colonial regime in a similar manner Gandhi managed to do in India.

Another exciting aspect of the faith is that its hierarchical structure was also inspired by the one employed by the Catholic Church. The Cao Đài had a Pope as well as the other similar ranks. However, in this particular version of the Catholic hierarchy, they have instituted an aspect that was somewhat rare at the time: gender equality. The followers believe that the male God (The Jade Emperor) and his female equivalent, the Mother Goddess, revealed in séances that male and female followers should have equal status within the faith. As a result, women can serve as priests, bishops, archbishops, or cardinals within the religious hierarchy. Again, we see an instance in which the natives adopt and adapt an aspect of the colonizer's culture. They are subverting the traditional hierarchical structure employed by the Catholic Church by adding what we would now call progressive elements. Even more interesting is the presence of the Goddess of Mercy (Kwan Yin) within the pantheon of the Cao Dai. In Buddhist scripture, she is depicted as changing her gender throughout her life from female to male. For this reason, Cathryn Bailey considers her a point of identification for trans people in her article "The Feminist Potential of the Trans Bodhisattva" (178-196). The Cao Dai are also vegetarians, are prohibited from living a luxurious life, drinking alcohol, lying, and committing lewd acts ("The New Canonical Codes").

Figure 4: Tay Ninh Holy See–Vietnam
(Photo: Personal Archive)

They have also adopted similar priestly hats in their attire and built the Tay Ninh Holy See through an architectural hybridization process that combines a Catholic Church's elements with a Buddhist pagoda and Islamic Mosque **[Figure 4]**. In her Stanford lecture entitled "Jesus, Lenin, and Victor Hugo," Hoskins states that "the cathedral front is just a front" (min. 6). She employs this having in mind the English idiom "to serve as a front for someone or something" meaning "to serve as the public contact or public" face "for someone or something, to seem reputable in order to hide underhanded activities—

(We would say subversive)." During the colonial era, many indigenous religious movements were banned because they were considered too political, and indeed, in the end, the same happened to the Cao Đài because the French authorities accused them of being "communism masquerading as a religion" (Thompson 474). While we cannot say that they were masquerading since they genuinely believe, even to this day when the French are gone, in the creation of their universal doctrine of tolerance, it is noteworthy to point out that designing the front of the temple as a Catholic cathedral did manage to make the movement more palatable to the colonial authorities, at least for some time. In this sense, we observe the Cao Đài reworking elements belonging to the colonizer's culture to create a safe space to practice a wide variety of beliefs, some of which were explicitly forbidden. They were adopting yet at the same time subverting the colonial discourse of power. We must understand that the symbolic structure of the temple is of such nature that the most important religious rituals took place in the Asian section of the Holy See rather than in the first chambers that most resemble a Catholic cathedral. Janet Hoskins mentions in her Stanford lecture that the structure implies a series of ascending levels, the front being the least sacred part of the cathedral. The most sacred part is actually at the back, where the chamber dedicated to spirit séances is located (min. 4). Many other aspects can be discussed concerning the faith. However, these are the most relevant visual elements.

Conclusions

The present paper has had, and I believe, managed to achieve two different goals. On the one hand, I wanted to review some of the main reasons we often overlook non-western modes of resistance within the postcolonial discourse and why this tendency is tributary to colonialism itself. On the other hand, I offered a practical example of different visually subversive tactics in a non-secular context by attempting a symbolic analysis of visual representations employed by the Cao Đài in their struggle against colonialism. In conclusion, we can argue that Homi Bhabha's definition of hybridity and mimicry played a significant role in the emergence of Caodaism, the adoption of certain artistic, cultural and spiritual aspects but most relevantly in the adaptation and employment of these features to subvert the colonial discourse.

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Book Review: *Y nació el asesino en serie. El origen cultural del monstruo en el cine de terror estadounidense*, by Erika Tiburcio Moreno

Book Reviewed:
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"I believe the only way to reform people is to kill them." This quote from Carl Panzram[41] seems to aptly summarise a common reading since the 1980s, that is, that serial killers as a social construction have been read as a reforming, standardizing force that threatened society and warned them about the dangers of otherness. Indeed, and as author Erika Tiburcio explains in the introduction to this engaging volume, the birth of the serial killer is neither objective nor innocent, but it instead answers to the discourses and counter-discourses of the time to transmit a series of ideas. In fact, the main thesis that the author posits in the book states that, in summary, the idea of the monster was readily adopted by the societal superstructures to construct a hegemonic discourse wherein serial killers were used to enforce the values of the ruling classes by reminding everyone of the looming threat that otherness represented. Likewise, the author conducted a quantitative analysis where 110 serial killer films are arranged so as to more easily identify the most common characteristics of these serial killers, such as gender, geographical location, their reasons, or whether or not they finally meet their end, and what all of these can tell us about the society at the time and its values.

The book fits comfortably among numerous other cultural critiques of our time that focus on the late twentieth century, especially from structuralist and post-structuralist sources. In that regard, it does not exactly present an overarching air of originality in some of the ideas. However, it does present us with an engaging reading of the serial killer as a cultural phenomenon where the author looks at the existing evidence and produces a refined and renewed debate that contributes to current scholarship in the field. Moreover, it makes an outstanding contribution to the field with its quantitative analysis and a methodical process that is unfortunately not so commonly used in the humanities if often favoured in the social sciences.

Furthermore, the style Erika Tiburcio adopts for the book appropriately adapts the topic, which is highly theoretical, to a broader audience and creates a compelling and appealing argument for academic researchers and students alike while also staying accessible and engaging non-academic readers. Indeed, the book masterfully adapts and brings these ideas to the ordinary reader, which is both a unique and welcome characteristic, besides being especially appropriate for a volume on pop cultural criticism. Moreover, in addition to staying accessible and relevant with its style, it also succeeds in being a fascinating

[41] https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/276985-i-have-no-desire-whatever-to-reform-myself-my-only
American serial killer from the first half of the twentieth century – he died in 1930

volume for academic researchers and horror fans due to its fine-eyed theoretical analysis and comprehensive quantitative investigation.

Tiburcio uses her expertise and extensive training as a historian and presents us with a diachronic study of the serial killer, starting from the 1960s and introducing the historical events that helped shape the evolution of the serial killers and their subsequent reconstruction as monsters in popular culture. By explaining how the hegemonic discourse was built on the tenets of American exceptionalism in the '50s and how it went beyond political and moral judgment, Tiburcio elaborates on the idea that, when the USSR challenged those very values, a wide variety of monsters began to appear in American culture to represent the different fears and anxieties that the society at the time had, and how the impending threat of external influence was viewed in the 1950s America.

The author explains how the consequences of World War II would make it impossible to still cling to pre-war trends in film and how deep social unrest would eventually create the perfect breeding ground for the change against the hegemonic discourse that serial killers needed to take a more definitive shape. Indeed, between 1946 and 1964, the first baby boomers appeared, and they would ultimately conform to the most significant inside criticism and influence in the USA in the form of a countercultural movement that challenged the established discourse. Along with the baby boomers, the highly Puritan American society from the 1950s and 1960s would witness the birth of second-wave Feminism, hippie, sexual liberation, anti-war, and ecologists movements. Suddenly, many of the aspects that had been upheld as paramount to American culture and which indeed fed back into American exceptionalism were being challenged: countercultural movements threw down a gauntlet on hegemonic discourse, and the social construction of serial killers readily accepted the challenge.

Thus, the first representations of these murderers would appear in the 1960s and often surreptitiously criticize the new ideas that undermined traditional sexuality and family values by linking the murderer's motives to their decadent sexuality. Indeed, both *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *Dressed to Kill* (Brian de Palma, 1980) would explain that the reason for the murderer's madness was no other than having accepted the otherness that was being suggested as an alternative by countercultural agents in America at the time. This, moreover, would be usually done using a figure of authority such as psychiatrists and forensic psychologists, which would help defend hegemonic discourse through the pathologization of any possible otherized characteristic in these serial killers. This would, later on, give way to biopics based on actual events, which would challenge the features above mentioned by presenting us now with monstrous but *normal* murderers, whose deeply seated unrest coming from dysfunctional families and the absence of boundaries would make them lash out against women who were gaining notoriety in the public sphere. This construction of serial killers began a two-way discourse with culture at the time and took on many of the near fantastic characteristics that gossip and authentic crime programs attributed to serial killers. At the same time, it served to feed and inform the same popularly constructed mythological figure of the serial killer. In that way, the figure goes from a deranged human whose life has been destroyed by liberal values to an entity to which one could no longer assign any identity and could safely represent societal anxieties without ascribing these threats to any specific agent. Thus, in the 1980s, and with the advent of the slasher genre, serial killers would become magical and near unstoppable killing machines that would even come back from the grasp of death to keep their legacy of revenge against otherness and subversive values.

Along with constructing this mythological serial murderer, America would also offset some dyadic relationships by presenting certain values and characteristics as paramount to normalcy. They would be opposed to those brandished or reclaimed by the countercultural revolution. Thus, serial killers would often be white males against transgressive women, they would represent the vengeance of the working classes against the oppressive and white-collared ruling class, or would embody the spirit of a rural world

which, long forlorn and neglected by the government, now fought back against wealthy, urban, and trespassing victims.

Erika Tiburcio, in the end, ties up her thesis with those final remarks about the representation of neo-conservative values in serial killers and concludes that the very term used to represent them had very successfully transformed the construction itself by giving it an umbrella term under which American people could fit as many characteristics, be they real or mythological, as they would, and this would eventually depersonalize serial killers to allow them to continue with their evolution to their postmodern iteration. Given that the book aims to provide the reader with a model which explains how post-war social changes informed the social construction of serial killers, the volume proves itself a valuable and exciting addition to any film or cultural criticism course. Of course, this would greatly benefit from an additional discourse focusing on newer cultural productions to try to analyze, among other things, how the frequent and widespread revisitation to slasher films from the 1980s that have been released in the 2010s and 2020s have challenged—if so—those values, or whether or not they have moved on to newer, greener pastures to keep up with the time. It would be fascinating to see how the model presented in the book continues to analyze the evolution of serial killers as a representation of societal anxieties, but unfortunately, this part is not covered in the book. The previous notwithstanding, Tiburcio's *Y nació el asesino en serie* proves to be a reliable resource in film and cultural criticism. It completely covers its intentions while contributing an engaging and refined view of some previously mentioned criticized aspects of culture.

Moreover, it adds to academic knowledge by presenting a well-put-together essayistic analysis of the social construction of serial killers. It also uses quantitative methodologies to correctly measure the main aspects posited by the theory: gender, nationality, space, and race. Therefore, the book must be considered entirely successful in the objectives set out at the beginning. Erika Tiburcio offers an astute reading of the topic at hand while providing the reader with her historical acumen and insight, making the volume more distinct and exciting while remaining accessible and engaging.

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